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LAURA ERLE.

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LAURA ERLE.

A Nobel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

‘BLANCHE SEYMOUR,’ ‘ERMA’S ENGAGEMENT,’
ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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LAURA ERLE.

CHAPTER I.

SPRING had come again, and the world had renewed its beautiful youth.

‘Through wood and stream and field and hill and ocean,
A quickened life from the Earth’s heart has burst,
As it has ever done, with change and motion,
From the great morning of the world, when first
God dawned on Chaos ; in its stream immersed,
The lamps of Heaven flash with a softer light ;
All baser things pant with life’s sacred thirst ;
Diffuse themselves ; and spend in love’s delight,
The beauty and the joy of their renewed might.’

And those whose renewal was not to be here,
but in that other land where

‘There’s no night following their daylight hours,
No fading time for amaranthine flowers,’

had been touched by the sickle of the Great

Reaper, and had gone from strength to strength, every one of them in Zion appearing before God.

Those whose paths still lay among 'these lower ways' were vigorous with hope and joy, sharing the life of the opening buds and flowers.

Enleigh was radiant in all its spring loveliness, and Mrs. Elliott and Audrey and Digby had come back there to add the beauty and the interest of their human joys and sorrows.

Digby had travelled home with them, and so constant was he in his attendance that people wondered he did not attach himself permanently to the family by laying himself and his possessions at Audrey's feet.

He would have done so had it not been for Mrs. Elliott, but he dreaded that lady in more ways than one. Her incessant railing against the married state made him fear at one moment that she would oppose her niece's entry into it; at another he was apprehensive that Audrey, not liking to leave her,

might propose her living with them at Glyn-ton.

Had such a proposition been made, he hardly knew how he could refuse his assent to it; but the prospect of Mrs. Elliott *en permanence* was, to say the least of it, a qualification to the felicity he might hope to enjoy as Audrey's husband.

As an occasional companion and guest he found her charming; her caustic humour added flavour to the dulness and insipidity of ordinary life; but no one likes perpetual cayenne, and to be incessantly exposed to her keen and often cruel sarcasms would be a serious drawback to domestic bliss. These were not so much definite conclusions to which he had come as states of feeling which influenced him without his being aware of it.

Meantime he was very happy, and Audrey was equally so. They had travelled far into that Arcadia of which she had spoken to her aunt, and no storms had as yet come to remind them that Arcadia had its limits.

As he was passing through town Sir Digby

met Harold Carew. A very few minutes' conversation sufficed to show the former that his friend would gratefully accept an invitation to Glynton. He gave it accordingly, and the two went down together.

Mr. Carew's learned researches had lost their charm for him. He was so incessantly haunted by the question, 'How am I to see her?' that till it was answered he could not settle to anything. He had no hope that his mother would spontaneously invite Laura to Melbury again, and he shrank from making her the subject of contention; he doubted seriously, too, whether Laura would accept the invitation, even if given. During the Dashwoods' absence he could not go to Enleigh, and he dreaded to encounter the five Miss Ellises. The bare possibility that Claude's fate might ever be his filled him with alarm.

He had at one time seriously thought of taking up his abode at Hillingdon under the pretext of pursuing his archæological studies. There were the Abbey and the Priory 'convenient,' on which to hang excuses; but then

that would not insure his seeing Laura, unless he could summon up courage to go boldly to the Rectory and call on her. And that was a pronounced measure; he had never called on a lady in his life, and might she not resent his doing so as an impertinence? He was quite ignorant of the etiquette in such matters, and had no one to consult.

This scholarly Goliath, ever eager to drink delight of battle—not with his peers, for if the truth must be told, Mr. Carew was too apt to think he had no peers, but with any one bold enough to enter the lists with him, whose constant cry was, ‘Give me a man that we may fight together,’—was strangely timid where Laura, who had certainly never shown any hesitation in ‘coming on,’ was concerned. He felt that he should never have the courage to go to the Rectory door and ask to see her, though the wish to do so, to hear her voice, to watch her ever-changing face, was a constant torment to him.

It was while he was in this state of uncertainty that kind Providence brought across

his path Sir Digby Forester. That meeting simplified matters greatly. Once at Glynton, some opportunity of seeing Laura would present itself.

The young lady's name was not mentioned by either gentleman. She might as well not have existed, so far as any communication respecting her between them was concerned; but the day after their arrival the host proposed to Harold that they should drive over to Enleigh together. Nothing could have suited the guest better; and after a toilet more than usually elaborate he started with his friend.

Mrs. Elliott had a cold; and Digby, who never failed in delicate attention to her, went up to pay her a visit in her own sitting-room, while Audrey entertained Harold in the drawing-room.

'Have you seen your friend, Miss Erle, since your return?' he asked.

Yes; Audrey saw her every day.

'I thought, perhaps, I might have found her here,' he said, in a tone in which regret at not finding her was very evident.

‘So you might, had you been a few minutes earlier; she is only just gone.’

‘How very unlucky! I had hoped to have seen her.’

‘You may do so still. She is at home, I know,’ returned Audrey, amused at the *naïveté* which revealed so simply the object of his visit.

‘But she is not coming here again?’

‘Not to-day; but you can call at the Rectory.’

‘I could hardly do that, could I?’

‘Why not?’

‘She might think it a liberty—might not like it, perhaps.’

‘I can conceive no reason why she should not. There is nothing unusual in a gentleman calling on a lady.’

‘But could I go and ask for Miss Erle?’

‘Ye-es; I think so; at all events, you can ask for Mrs. Erle. Mr. Erle has been ill, and, naturally, you and Lady Emily are anxious to know how he is,’ with great gravity.

‘Of course, of course; I never thought of that. Naturally, I wish to know how Mr. Erle is;’ decidedly. ‘Naturally, my mother wishes to know;’ this was a little less decided. ‘I will go at once. I had better, had I not, or she may be out?’ standing up, and offering his hand.

Audrey certainly thought he ought to go at once; but while he was taking leave of her in all haste, the door opened, and Laura herself came into the room. On seeing him she drew back, almost unconsciously, colouring deeply. His look of delight was unmistakable; he went forward to meet her, extending his hand, with a smile which revealed him to Audrey in quite a new light.

‘Miss Erle! I was so hoping to see you! I was just coming to call on you. Miss Dashwood thought I might venture.’

The revelation in his face deprived Laura of the power of speech. No words were needed for the interpretation of his look.

Audrey was too tactful to stay in the room, though, in fact, her presence did not

embarrass Harold at all. He had neither eyes nor ears for any one but Laura.

‘Will you excuse me for a moment?’ she said. ‘I just want to speak to aunt Eleanor.’

‘Don’t go, Audrey,’ exclaimed Laura.

But Audrey was gone; and Harold continued eagerly:

‘I have been so anxious to see you for a long time; in fact, ever since you left Melbury; but I did not know how to manage it. I missed you when you went away more than I ever missed any one in my life.’

Laura was not equal to the occasion. She did not know what to answer and could only look down, colouring painfully.

‘Will you let me say something to you?’ he went on, in a simple earnest way, which had the effect of bringing tears into her eyes. ‘The day you left Melbury I wanted to go with you part of the way;—you recollect?’ She assented. ‘But you did not seem to wish it; and I would not have annoyed you for the world; still, I was very sorry, for I wanted to ask you a question. I should like

to have you always with me; I am always thinking of you. I hope I have not said anything to vex you?' as two tears fell from her eyes.

What answer could she give to this simple earnest appeal?

'Not to vex me, Mr. Carew; but I am so sorry, so grieved.'

'Grieved? Why?'

'I hope I have never done anything to mislead you, for—I have not the feeling towards you you wish me to have. I was afraid how it was; and that was why I asked you not to come with me that day. I wanted you to know; yet I was so sorry to see you were hurt,' in a voice of genuine pain.

Both were standing just where they had first shaken hands with each other. He was silent for a few minutes after her last words, as if trying to command himself; then he said:

'Don't distress yourself; you never did anything to mislead me; but I was so happy in your society that perhaps I did not think

enough about your—your sentiments towards me. I liked you so much that I fancied you must like me too. I don't know how it is that I can speak to you quite freely about everything—more freely even than to my mother. I suppose it is because I like you; and I am going to ask you a question now which I hope you won't think intrusive or impertinent?' looking at her interrogatively.

She said 'Certainly not,' in a low voice.

'Were you at all influenced in the answer you have just given me by what you may suppose to be my mother's wishes in the matter, or was it dictated entirely by your own feelings towards me?'

This was an embarrassing question, and her face showed that she found it so. While she hesitated for a suitable reply he waited patiently, as one who did not doubt that, whatever that reply was, it would be frank and straightforward.

After a pause, she looked at him.

'I will answer you as honestly as I can,'

she said: 'I was influenced by both the feelings you speak of. I do not think I feel towards you as a woman should feel towards the man she marries.' During that pause her mind had gone back to the wild delirium of joy into which Claude's proposal had thrown her. 'I also know that it would be a great grief to your mother if I became your wife; and I would never enter a family into which I should not be cordially welcomed.'

'I thought—I hoped there was something of that,' he said, looking much relieved. 'And now you must let me try to overcome your scruples. With respect to the first, I shall be quite content with your liking, just as it is; or I will wait as long as you please, if you can only say that some day you will like me better. Is there any reason why you should not? any reason of which you may not wish to tell me, though it exists?'

She felt that that was hardly a fair question; yet it was put so gently, and with an air of such simple and perfect confidence in her, that she could not resent it.

He stood looking at her, expecting an answer; but, as she hesitated, he went on:

‘If there is any such reason, I must, of course, respect it, even if you do not think it right to tell me its nature; but if my mother’s supposed objections have chiefly influenced you—if they have kept you or tended to keep you from letting yourself like me—then I will ask you to reconsider what you have said. I hope you will do so.’

Miss Erle could not help thinking that if Mr. Carew knew little about woman in general he had, at least, studied her character to some purpose.

‘Even at the risk of seeming over persistent I must ask you to tell me if I am not right in saying that my mother’s objections have chiefly weighed with you?’ he concluded.

‘They weighed with me, certainly, but so did the other reason,’ she answered, much embarrassed.

‘But, Laura, if I am content. You don’t dislike me, do you?’ smiling a little and trying to take her hand.

‘No-o, I don’t, and—and—you have been very kind to me, but—Mr. Carew, you must not take my hand, because, don’t you see that in your case no marriage could be a happy one for either you or your wife that did not really please your mother?’ and she resolutely withdrew her hand.

‘No, I don’t see that at all. Will you sit down and just let me say a few words to you on the subject?’

She knew he would not convince her, for she would not be convinced, and saw no good in prolonging the interview; but a recollection of how over hasty she had been with Claude made her hesitate. She would not run the risk of needlessly paining him by refusing to listen to all he wished to say, so she sat down and he stood beside her, his hand resting on the back of her chair.

He urged with much force, that which she had herself admitted, that he was not bound to marry merely to please his mother; and further that as the latter had never spoken to her on the subject she was, at best, but

assuming the existence of the objections to which she attached so much importance. Admitting, however, that they did exist, Lady Emily would get over them.

‘She might; she would tolerate me, and I—I decline to be tolerated,’ replied Laura.

‘She would do more than tolerate you; she is very, very fond of you; how could she be otherwise? Her objections are fanciful, they have no real foundation.’

Laura observed that he never denied their existence.

‘They have the strongest of all foundations, Mr. Carew; they are founded on feeling and sentiment, so you can’t grapple with them.’

‘But what feeling? What sentiment?’ he asked, as if anxious for her help to enable him to understand such an incomprehensible state of mind on his mother’s part.

‘She considers it a very inferior and poor match for you; one altogether out of your own—not rank, perhaps—’

‘Rank ! certainly not. Such an idea is absurd.’

‘Not so absurd as you imagine ; however, I won’t say “rank,” but “circle.” It would be marrying out of your circle. I am not a fine lady, you know, Mr. Carew ; only one of the working bees of the world.’

‘I know nothing about fine ladies,’ he answered ; ‘but I do know this, that you are the only lady I ever saw whom I wished to have always with me. I always want to tell you everything, and I should like to give you all I have. You once spoke to me about Miss Bingley, and told me I should try to discover her good qualities, but I never wanted any one to tell me to find out yours, or to remind me that I should go and talk to you. I do not think it right that when I have these feelings towards you any objections of my mother’s about your being a fine lady or not should weigh with me, or that you should let them weigh with you.’

‘But they do weigh with me very seriously. Remember, you are all she has in the

world. Her devotion to you is the most beautiful and touching thing I ever saw.'

'Then it should teach her to accept you, Laura,' in a softened voice, 'for you are essential to my happiness. Having known you, how can she expect me to marry Miss Bingley?' rather indignantly. 'She conceived that preposterous idea before she saw you, and she would love you dearly, I feel convinced, not only for yourself, but for my sake. You, who do so much justice to her affection for me, should see that. But even if she did not, that would not alter my love for you.'

'Mr. Carew, I have listened to you; now listen to me. Lady Emily's objections are deeper and stronger than you think. Even if I could so far conquer myself as to enter a family on sufferance, believe me you would, after a very short time, find what a drawback to your happiness your mother's want of cordiality would be. You could not leave her to live alone; at least you would not, I am sure; and if you did, I, for one, could not be happy as your wife. How could I be happy when I

thought my happiness was bought at another's expense—especially at the expense of one so absorbed in her love for you? You owe her something for her lifelong devotion to you. It is not as if she had other children.'

He walked to the window and back.

'One would certainly think I was proposing to commit a crime, and not to secure for myself the greatest help and blessing Heaven can bestow on a man,' he said rather angrily then; 'if my mother's love can only lead her to deprive me of you for the most senseless and stupid of human prejudices, it seems to me at this moment a doubtful good. But you altogether overrate her opposition, and exaggerate her feeling in this matter. She might prefer my marrying some senseless fine lady, which seems to be your term for the incarnation of imbecility you and she kindly offer me in Miss Bingley; but she would congratulate herself in six weeks that she had escaped perpetual association with such dulness, and she would adore you.'

Miss Erle listened in discreet silence while

her lover thus delivered himself, walking up and down before her like an angry animal. Seeing that she did not reply he went on: 'It would need but a very slight sacrifice of pride on your part to win her altogether. In fact, I am sure she would welcome you with open arms once she knew I was actually engaged to you; and if, as you permit me to understand, her fancied objections are your chief reason for denying my request, I cannot but think you exceedingly wrong and acting with altogether less than your usual good sense and generous feeling.'

This scolding Miss Erle also bore in silence though with a burning face, and as she did not seem disposed to answer, the gentleman went on—'You are not willing, then, to make this small sacrifice of your pride for my sake?'

'No, Mr. Carew, I am not willing,' in a low voice; 'and that ought to convince you that I should be wronging you deeply by marrying you. I may be proud and wrong, as you say; but there is one wrong I will

never commit, and that is, to become the wife of any man unless I feel more strongly for him than I do for you, much as I respect and like you.'

'I have told you that I am content with what you say you can give — respect and liking.'

'But I am not content; do not urge me any more. It cannot be, indeed.'

'I think you are wrong in every way; sacrificing to a scruple, if not to something worse, the happiness and welfare of three people; for you will, I feel sure, regret yourself one day what you are now doing. However, I have no right to urge you farther. I have said all I can say. You have used your undoubted privilege; but you have, in my opinion, used it as badly as it was possible to do.'

With which very frank expression of his sentiments Mr. Carew walked to the window and stood looking out while the object of his ire sat still, her face burning to such a degree that she felt as if her eyes must take fire too,

unless she succeeded in stopping the expected conflagration by a flood of tears.

The remedy, however, was too humiliating; to have let her irate lover see her so moved would have been a tribute to his vituperative eloquence which she was by no means disposed to afford him, even had she not been oppressed also at the moment by a very unseemly desire to laugh. In mobile natures, tears and smiles are never far apart. Laura's were apt to mingle like April sunshine and showers; but to have treated Mr. Carew to even an April shower now would have been adding insult to injury. Had he seen the least sign of one he would afterwards have tormented himself with regrets for the severity of his speech; so, to save him these regrets, she commanded herself and sat still, 'feeling like a fool,' as her brother John would have expressed himself.

Gentlemen who have been in Mr. Carew's position can best tell how he felt; not so 'like a fool' as the lady, however, for he had the satisfaction of thinking himself deeply ill-used,

which is always consolatory. Had Laura been possessed of that magic ring whereby she could have rendered herself invisible, how thankfully would she have escaped without opening the door, or otherwise attracting his attention ! As she did not possess the ring and must pass close to him in order to reach the door, she did not know what to do. It seemed too entirely ungracious to leave him without one word of regret for the disappointment she had caused.

Fortunately, Audrey's opportune return got her out of her difficulty. That young lady, walking on the lawn with Digby, saw Harold in solitary gloom by the window, and divining that had things gone well he would not have been alone, went to the rescue.

One glance at Laura's burning face and reproachful eyes explained all. Under cover of her presence the latter hoped to effect a retreat, but as she reached the door Harold turned suddenly.

'Are you going, Miss Erle? Good-bye,' holding out his hand. 'The decision you

have come to grieves me more than I can say; however, I have no right to assume that your motive does not seem a good one in your own eyes.'

'I am very, very sorry,' was all she could reply; but if looks ever expressed sympathy and regret, hers were eloquent.

'I cannot think your life would have been less bright had you consented to add a little brightness to mine,' he said, and then she went away.

Later in the afternoon Audrey went down to the Rectory.

'Laura, Harold Carew told me I was to be sure and apologise for his not having come here to inquire for your father, but he thought, under the circumstances, you would prefer his not coming.'

'He inquired enough for my father's daughter to do for the whole family.'

'And why did your father's daughter give him such an answer? I think you are much to blame.'

‘Now, Audrey, I won’t be scolded any more. I have had enough for one day.’

‘Who scolded you? Harold?’

‘He was as charmingly frank as if I had been his wife; but “first catch your hare” is a good recipe for other things besides hare soup!’

‘I agree with him that you are mistaken.’

‘Naturally; women always do agree with men in these cases; but I remember what his mother did for my scapegrace brother, and am not going to make her such an ill return as to become her darling Harold’s wife. I cannot be ignorant of the fact, my dear Audrey, for it has been so often impressed on me, that I am a charming girl, quite delightful, indeed, but altogether undesirable as a connexion by marriage. An overpowering liking for any one might have borne me over into the sea of matrimony, but I cannot stand being patronised in cold blood.’

‘Lady Emily would not have patronised you.’

‘No; she is the dearest old woman in the

world. She would not have patronised me, and she is so fond of me that she wished to have me always near her; and as I was not good enough for her dear Harold, she did her best to marry me to Mr. Saffery of Snail Farm, a lunatic at large, who believes that Hector is buried on the top of Melbury Hill.'

'Well, in return, she wished to marry him to Frances Bingley, who always reminds me of a well-groomed horse, and you aided and abetted her. That disgusted him more than anything else. He told me, indignantly, that he did not want to marry for the sake of being married, but for the sake of having you for a wife.'

'To scold, as he did to-day. As if I could be scolded into marrying him!'

'You must forgive him, dear! Think of his disappointment! If I did not blame you as much as he does I would tell you some of the pretty things he said about you.'

'I don't want to hear them.'

'Don't you? Then as nothing is so bad for you as too much of your own way I will tell

you one thing he said, because I do so entirely agree with it.'

'What was it? Something disparaging, I have no doubt.'

'He said your over-tenacious pride was the one defect in your character.'

'Because my pride happens to interfere with his wishes. My pride was right in his eyes and wrong in his mother's, when it made me refuse Mr. Saffery's obliging offer. No, Audrey; because Harold Carew chooses to say he will take me on any terms I can offer, am I not to think of my own feelings at all? I am not content to take him on any terms; and whatever he may say, I am not wrong in refusing him, when I don't feel towards him as I think a girl should feel towards the man she marries.

'Would you have me rush into a marriage as Claude did with Violet?' she added, colouring suddenly a bright carmine.

Then Audrey saw that, even after a wound is healed to all appearance, there may occasionally be sharp stings of pain known only to

the sufferer and to Him from whom no secrets
are hid.

‘ I have no wealth of grief ; no sobs, no tears,
Not any sighs, no words, no overflow
Nor storms of passion ; no reliefs, yet, oh,
I have a leaden grief, and with it fears
Lest they who think there’s naught where naught
 appears
May say I never loved him ! Ah, not so !’

CHAPTER II.

CLAUDE and Violet were a good deal at Enleigh during the ensuing summer and autumn. Colonel Wilmot was abroad, and his absence accounted partly for the increased harmony of their domestic relations. They certainly got on better together, as all their friends confessed. This improvement was due, too, in a great degree to Laura Erle's influence, which always had a softening effect on Claude.

Unconsciously almost, both had fallen into many of the old familiar ways. Claude was again much at the Rectory, again brought her books and music, again consulted her, and not unfrequently followed her advice, a compliment we do not often pay our dearest friends. Indeed, one of the tests of real friendship may be said to be a willingness to offer good advice with the firm conviction that it will not be taken.

But Claude took Laura's ; nor did he now, that there was no longer any possibility of her becoming his wife, show any of that jealousy of her powers and development which had characterised his former intercourse with her. He never attempted to repress her or to make her feel that her abilities were something to be ashamed of.

Why do men appreciate and admire in other women qualities and gifts which they not only dislike but will not tolerate (if they can help it) in a wife? Is the fact due to jealousy? They shrink from that word as applied to themselves. They would fain have women believe that the passion finds no place in the serene masculine breast. Well, perhaps women are mistaken in the conclusions they sometimes draw. If the fact is not due to jealousy, is it due to the essentially false morality instilled into both men and women on the subject of the duties, feelings, and relations of husbands and wives towards each other? Perhaps some philosopher may one day arise who will offer an explanation which

will satisfy the feminine mind without wounding masculine susceptibility.

To whatever cause the fact is to be attributed, it is certain that Claude no longer showed any jealousy (or whatever the feeling was) of Laura, and she found him in consequence a pleasanter companion than he had ever been before. He was more agreeable as a friend than as a lover, less exacting, less touchy; and an elevated and almost romantic sentiment seemed to have entered into his regard for her of which his character as hitherto developed had given no earnest. It was love passed through the crucible and transmuted into a most poetic though not quite unselfish friendship. There are men who, once they fall under the influence of certain women, feel that influence to the very end of their lives. They may quarrel, circumstances may separate them and they may not meet for years; but the moment they do meet the influence re-asserts itself, and all the opposing influences in the world will not really avail to counter-act it. If such people marry, though storms

may come, the marriage is all that God meant marriage to be ; if they do not marry, if opposing Fates have separated them, the influence, though dormant, never dies, and should they meet again it gives strong-enough proof of this. If the woman be of the noble, not the ignoble type, the two fall naturally into an enduring friendship, which need not cause one moment's uneasiness to the most tender and devoted wife.

Violet, though resenting in her heart Claude's want of openness about his previous relations with Laura, never showed the least dislike to his renewed intimacy with her.

Live and let live was her rule of life, as it is that of so many pleasure-loving natures. Why should not Claude talk to Laura if he liked, provided he granted her an equal liberty respecting her friends ? That was all she asked, and she rejoiced in the increased tolerance shown by him for her ways and modes of thinking and acting when he was under Laura's influence.

One day as they were sitting together

under the trees, she put a question to Laura suddenly about her former relations with Claude.

‘He has never told me himself,’ she said; ‘but I know he liked you, and once proposed to you.’

Laura immediately related the whole story.

Violet listened in silence, and then said,

‘Don’t you think he ought to have told me?’

‘Certainly; I thought he had.’

‘Never; and I’m sure now that he did not care for me in the least.’

‘Yes, he did. He cared for you in one way, for me in another. He always expressed the greatest admiration for you.’

‘It is very odd I should not have heard about you and him. Had I known about it, I would not have married him, you would have made up your quarrel, and we might all have been happier,’ with a sad ring in her voice, as she thought of the regret Colonel Wilmot had once expressed at the tardiness of his good fortune.

‘Never, Violet,’ said Laura emphatically. ‘We are good friends. We should never have been more. He would not have cared for me as a wife: I see that now.’

‘Didn’t you hate me when I wrote to tell you we were engaged?’

‘No, not you; I was very angry with him, but all that is over now.’

Violet said nothing, but sat looking out before her. They were sitting under the trees on the lawn at Enleigh—the garden, a blaze of gorgeous colour, spread out before them.

‘Was it because of Claude you refused Harold Carew?’ asked Violet at last.

‘No; my refusal had nothing to do with Claude whatever.’

‘And do you never wish now you were Claude’s wife?’

‘Never, dear Violet; any more than I should wish to pick your pocket.’

Violet had asked the question looking straight out before her: after a pause she said, turning her blue eyes on her companion,

‘You are such a queer girl, Laura! I

don't know what to make of you at times. We ought to hate each other, oughtn't we? or is it only in books people do that?

'I don't see why we should hate each other,' answered Laura.

'We don't, that is quite certain; at least I know I don't hate you, and if you hate me you take pains to hide it. It was Dick who first told me about you and Claude. I wish Claude had told me himself: I should then have thought he had got to like me a little,' a quiver in her voice.

Laura uttered some vague assurances that want of affection had nothing to do with his reticence, but she did not find it very easy to make excuses for him, and little more was said on the subject between them, only that Violet asked Laura not to tell Claude they had spoken of it.

In many ways Laura was a better friend to Claude and Violet than Audrey. From natural temperament she was more tolerant and sympathetic, and took larger views. Violet's low moral tone repelled the latter; her con-

tempt for religious conventionalities shocked her ; whereas Laura was never shocked, and because she was not, Violet never tried to horrify her as she did Claude and Audrey. The two, essentially different as they were, liked each other, sympathised with each other, and to a certain extent understood each other, or rather agreed that there were elements in each which the other did not and could not understand ; and had it not been for Laura, Violet would have found Enleigh unendurably dull. It was on the whole the happiest time Claude and his wife had passed together since their marriage, though the latter would sometimes tell Laura that life with only one man in her train was unendurable ; and that the woman who could be content with the *fade* attention only of her husband was no better than a country-bred miss.

CHAPTER III.

LAURA was staying in London with Audrey and Mrs. Elliott. The latter lady's invitations to her were cordial enough now that Claude had a wife. There were not wanting people who said that she would not have been sorry had Laura's attractions succeeded in outweighing Audrey's in Sir Digby Forester's eyes.

Seeing that Laura was not disposed to become Mrs. Carew, Mrs. Elliott was not disinclined to facilitate her elevation into Lady Forester.

She had latterly shown herself very jealous of the baronet's constant attendance on her niece. She was one of those women on whom the drawbacks of married life make more impression than its advantages. She was always inveighing against matrimony, and warning young people more or less openly against it;

girls especially, unless indeed they happened to be poor, when she would say with charming frankness, 'Marry by all means, my dear; it is a degree better than starvation.'

Intercourse with her was a perpetual series of surprises, as Digby Forester had lately found. Having received him gladly for more than two years, she now turned suddenly round and showed unmistakable signs of 'vice' whenever he appeared. This was owing to the fact that his manner to Audrey left no doubt what his wishes were, and Mrs. Elliott's natural distaste to the marriage of young people was in this instance increased by the knowledge that her niece's entrance into the holy estate would deprive her of her society; and though she did not always do all she might to secure the girl's happiness while with her, yet she did not know how she could live without her.

She was a small dark-eyed woman, with just enough *embonpoint* to avert the imputation of thinness, exceedingly graceful; with brown hair, not the least tinged with

gray, drawn back in youthful fashion from a soft feminine face, which, though she was past middle age, gave the impression of youth and prettiness—not beauty exactly. This look of youth and prettiness was the work of nature, not art; it was as genuine as the lady's still bright hair and pearly teeth. There are women who seem never to grow old. Mrs. Elliott's youthfulness, thus prolonged, was not the effect of a passionless unfeeling disposition. She was possessed of strong affections, though those affections were deeply tinged with selfishness and worldliness. She would prevent her niece from marrying if she could, but if she could not, if human nature refused to be expelled, then she would force her to do better than marry Digby Forrester.

Colonel Wilmot, whose tastes about women were certainly catholic, had lately made no secret of the admiration he felt for Audrey; and as there was every probability that he would succeed to a peerage in due course of time, Mrs. Elliott considered that he had

a better equivalent to offer any girl who became his wife than Digby Forester, who was only a baronet, and had not brains, so she affirmed, to win any higher title for himself. Her utterances on the subject of rank were as frank and as cynical as her 'advice to those about to marry.'

'The world is full of fools, my dear, and you must act accordingly. A man is no better for being a lord or a duke, but the fools think he is, and as long as they rule—and their reign is not over yet awhile—you had better fool them to the top of their bent.'

In accordance with this maxim, she held that if Audrey was to give up her liberty, she had better give it up to an earl than to a baronet. Colonel Wilmot's dissipation and *vie orageuse* awoke in her no disgust. She was as cynical in her disbelief in masculine goodness as Violet Dashwood; and when Audrey expressed herself strongly about the gentleman and his ways, her aunt told her she was a fool for her pains, and had better ask her sister-in-law to teach her something of the world.

‘I would as soon marry a murderer,’ said Audrey indignantly, as she thought with loathing of his constant hankering after Violet. Latterly, however, it must in justice be said, he was less constant in his attendance on Violet. As his wish to settle down and live quietly with Audrey increased, he abstained from anything to which she might point as a reason for rejecting him.

Whether she accepted or rejected him, Mrs. Elliott was anxious to get rid of Digby, so when they were in town she frequently asked Laura to visit them.

Laura was glad to go, being thus enabled to look after her two brothers, who were emulating Colonel Wilmot, on a limited scale, with admirable zeal. John was vindicating his sex by being a constant source of anxiety to his family, and his brother Teddy was his apt disciple.

One evening Laura came home from a walk with the former depressed and despairing. Advice and remonstrance seemed alike unavailing to arrest his downward career. She

and Audrey were to dine quietly with Claude and Violet ; and to divert her thoughts the latter proposed that they should go a little earlier, so as to see Violet's child before she went to bed. As they were going they saw Violet, gay, careless, lovely as ever, sitting in the park, the centre of a laughing group of people.

Not wishing to be detained they contrived to pass unobserved, and reaching Claude's house, went up at once into the nursery.

There a different scene met them ; one which struck both painfully by its suggestive contrast. Claude was sitting by the window, and at his knee, in her long white night-dress, knelt a little child about two years old, its hands clasped, its great eyes fixed on his face as it gave utterance to some sounds, which the initiated may have understood, but which to outsiders were perfectly unintelligible. They were Miss Dashwood's prayers, which she was repeating with that total lack of comprehension which makes the sight of a young child saying words of prayer so touching and so

suggestive. This prayer was her newest achievement, of which she was very proud. She finished it, despite the potent temptation to jump up and run to the two new-comers, confining her welcome to a smile, which broke out over the baby face ; then she rose, and clasping her small hands behind her, as she stood before Claude, volunteered something, which the nurse interpreted as an evening hymn.

The sad stern gravity of his face seemed to have no terrors for the little thing ; her eyes, large and gray, like his own, rested on him with fearless confidence. When she had done he took her on his knee, kissing her and seeming to understand perfectly well her baby talk. In a few minutes he carried her over, and placed her in her little cot ; then after playing with her for a second or two, turned to go down with his two guests.

They were sorry they had come in. He never liked people to know of those visits he paid to the nursery, seeming to be ashamed of the love he could not help feeling for this little child, though that love brought out all

the softest and best part of his nature. When he had gone first to the nursery, he had done it hesitatingly, as if he felt he had no business there; but by degrees his dread of the nurse's disapproval or ridicule wore off, and he went up every evening when he was at home. Sometimes he would carry the child off to his dressing-room, and play with it, and amuse it with unwearied gentleness, so that 'Pappa' became the object of the little creature's passionate devotion; but he always looked annoyed if he was found in the nursery.

The annoyance was partly due to the consciousness that he went so much there because Violet went so little, and that he was unable either to compel or persuade her to go oftener. His own earliest recollections centred round his mother, and he could not bear the idea that his child should acquire her first impressions from the nurse. Though he would have repudiated the imputation, he was really the most sentimental of mortals; and his sentimentality affected not only his views, but his actions.

As they went into the drawing-room Laura made some remark about the child.

‘Poor little thing!’ he said, with a sort of sigh; ‘I wonder what she will turn out!’

‘Audrey over again,’ returned Laura cheerfully; ‘she is very like her even now.’

He sat down, the look of stern gloomy sadness deepening on his face. Laura began to speak of John, who was one of those people who never let their friends forget their existence, and in thinking of other people’s grievances, Claude forgot his own for a time; but they recurred to him, and his brow clouded again at the sight of Violet, who came in presently with St. Clare Ellis and Colonel Wilmot, bright and unconcerned, as though the world contained no care, and she had had no husband waiting for her, nor a child to claim her attention.

She addressed Laura in her usual gay affectionate manner, but did not say one word to Claude.

He sat silent for some time, and then asked, in a voice of suppressed irritation, and

too much in the tone of a superior putting a question to an inferior about some neglected duty—‘Have you been up to see the child, Violet?’

She always detected the tone, and always resented it; he could not have done a more foolish thing than assume it; it hardened her and made her reckless, but never cowed her, as he hoped in some vague way that it would.

‘I have only just come in, as you see,’ she answered, in a voice of careless indifference.

‘You had better go and see her at once, or she will be asleep,’ with studied calmness.

‘Have you seen her?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then that is enough. Husband and wife are one, you say. You bid her good-night for me, I daresay.’

‘I did not; I concluded you would be in in time to go and see her.’

‘No; I haven’t seen her all day; she is all right, I conclude, or I should have heard of it from some of you.’

‘It is a matter of small concern to you, evidently,’ with an angry gleam in his eyes.

‘My maternal duties don’t weigh me down, I admit,’ she returned, in a tone which was aggravating, to put it mildly.

Married people who obtrude their affection for each other on outsiders are disgusting; that word is not too strong to stigmatise their utter violation of good taste; but there really ought to be a law to prohibit them from doing their quarrelling in public. They bring the married state into disrepute, scaring therefrom well-disposed young men and maidens, who might otherwise have been induced to enter therein.

Laura, who had not seen Mr. and Mrs. Claude Dashwood in the privacy of their domestic circle for many months, was shocked and surprised, not knowing which to blame most, Claude for wilfully aggravating his wife, or Violet for ostentatiously proclaiming her neglect of her most sacred duty.

When they got up-stairs Audrey inveighed

in the strongest terms against her sister-in-law for her heartlessness.

‘You see now what she is, Laura. Even you won’t stand up for her again after that specimen of herself.’

Laura could not find much to say for Violet; but the thought did pass through her mind—‘No one ever sins alone.’

Women are often accused of being hard on each other. The accusation is made by men, and is not more just than many others coming from the same quarter, if it be meant as a general one. As has been well and truly said by a lady of distinguished ability, ‘no woman engaged in an honest struggle with the world has ever yet lacked the help and countenance of other women;’ still there are cases in which women are hard on each other, but it will almost always be found that their severity is caused by the sympathy they feel for the sufferings of men, when those sufferings are caused by the incapacity or folly of the women belonging to them.

Audrey Dashwood was certainly hard on

Violet. Not only had she no natural sympathy with her, but loving her brother devotedly, and seeing him unhappy, she held his wife responsible for that unhappiness, and condemned her accordingly; and instead of softening Claude towards her, she embittered him, quite unconsciously, but very certainly, by constantly dwelling on her faults.

Not only was this bad in itself, but it added another to the many sources of discord prevailing between the husband and wife; for Violet, seeing that Audrey disliked her, would do nothing to conciliate her; and Claude, who deeply loved his sister, made this a constant subject of reproach to Violet.

During that summer and autumn at Enleigh, things had gone more smoothly between them; and Mrs. Ellis, Laura, and Audrey had been sanguine in their anticipations that henceforth all would be well; but Violet's disregard of her duties as a mother opened all the old wounds.

She had one little girl, and Claude had secretly hoped much from the salutary effects

of maternal love; but Violet had no love for children at all; the baby was of no interest whatever to her; she left it and all concerning it to her mother, and seemed, not unfrequently, to forget its existence; reserving, as Claude indignantly observed, all her cares and caresses for her dog.

Still he hoped that as the child grew older and became more interesting she would feel increased affection on it. He was full of sentimental ideas about the feelings of mothers, mothers of first-born babies especially; but Violet, not being sentimental, and having no preconceived notions about young mothers and first-born 'babes,' looked on the whole thing as a bore; saying that, as she had been at the trouble of bringing the child into the world, she had done her part, and some one else might do the rest.

Yet had she been left alone she would, in her own way, have been fond enough of the 'little thing,' as she called it, and the child was almost as fond of her as of Claude. Its baby face would light up with pleasure at the

sight of her, and then Violet would smile and look pretty and kiss it; but she could not understand its talk, and would appeal to Claude or the nurse for an explanation. She took no interest in its infantine ways, wearied of it after a few minutes, and sent it away.

All this Claude and Audrey took grievously to heart; and the child, which Mrs. Ellis had hoped would be a bond of union between them, was really a cause of further discord. Laura, who had not seen much of them for some time past, was grieved at the little harmony subsisting between them. Violet was more reckless than ever, and Claude's gloom and moroseness alternated with fits of fierce anger, when his wayward wife would absolutely refuse to be guided by him on some disputed point. The heart knoweth its own bitterness. There are wounds which will not bear probing by even the tenderest and most loving hand. Violet had her grievance, one known only to herself. The poison-drop which lay at the root of her life was the

conviction that Claude 'did not care for her really.'

Save the few words she had once said to Laura on the subject, she had never spoken to any one of this conviction, but it was constantly present to her mind, sometimes actively, sometimes dormant, but always hardening her, making her callous and reckless. It never occurred to her that perhaps this indifference was mutual, that she did not 'care for' Claude. She was as little disposed to look to her own duties as she had once accused him of being; but the truth was that, in her own way, she did 'care for' him very much. There was nothing of romantic passion in her liking—she would have scoffed at the suggestion of any such sentiment (the romance of her life, the little there was of it, had been unconsciously and very innocently dedicated to Colonel Wilmot)—but when she made up her mind to marry Claude she had the germs of liking and admiration sufficiently developed to allow of their being cultivated up to the highest point,

had he been only moderately judicious, and not bored her by long lectures and perpetual gloom.

Some women would have withered up under it all; she did not, having too much vitality; but she turned by a natural law to seek companionship among more genial spirits; always ready, however, to return to Claude at a moment's notice, till she made that discovery about Laura. Up to that time she had never doubted his affection for herself, and her waywardness and defiance had been as often as not only the pretty despotism of one strong in the belief that she is too well known and loved to be misunderstood. But Claude could not see this; he himself filled up his own mental vision so completely that there was not much room left for any one else to be seen: yet in a certain way he did 'care for' Violet, and he had resolved to be a good husband to her just as she had meant to be a good wife to him. But his task was harder than hers, and he overrated his strength. Violet did not come up to half his

requirements, or nearly satisfy the restless cravings of his heart; and as his passionate anger against Laura subsided and he realised the gulf that separated them, a feeling that he had been 'caught' by Violet grew in his mind, embittering him against her at times, and blinding him to her many natural good qualities. Nothing but the inexpressible charm of her manner and her beauty, which dominated him against his will, kept this bitterness from growing into positive dislike. But as the conviction grew on Violet that he had always been indifferent to her—had married her in a fit of anger against the girl to whom the best part of his life was given—she ceased to exercise, consciously at least, those thousand nameless little fascinations by which a woman controls, though she may torment, the man whose heart she believes to be her own.

If he did not love her or confide in her, she would not take the trouble either to tease or please him. So they drifted apart, feeling aggrieved with one another, and seeking else-

where the help and sympathy they should have found in each other. Claude was scarcely fully aware how he turned to Laura in all his cares and anxieties, and Violet— It is enough to say that Colonel Wilmot was her friend, and that he acted with all the base selfishness, the cowardly tampering with wrong, the deliberate cruelty of that most despicable of animals, a fast man. Language has no expression strong enough to stigmatise the conduct of one who, not having had the courage to marry the woman he loved, because marriage with her would have necessitated the abridgment of some of his vicious indulgences, could yet, when she had become the wife of another, hang about her, taking advantage of her differences with her husband, of the weak moments which even the strongest at times experience, merely for the gratification of his vanity.

‘Ye aiblins might, I dinna ken,
Still hae a *stake*.’

That is a noble hope; but if ever the ‘damnatory clauses’ dear to many excellent Christians,

have a justification, it is in the case of such a contemptible and sickly coward.

Colonel Wilmot did not want, however, to compromise himself actually; and after his reconciliation with his brother, with whom he had had a quarrel of many years' standing, he found it expedient to reënter the ranks of the respectables, into which Faust and Mephistopheles are always sure to be welcomed by people whose virtue is lofty, while Margaret is left to die in the street or elsewhere.

Colonel Wilmot's brother had lately succeeded to a peerage, and the whole family was undergoing that process of becoming good which is said to result from the possession of five thousand a year and upwards.

In order that the gallant Colonel should rise with his family, his brother insisted on his ceasing to 'philander' after Mrs. Claude Dashwood, and entering himself into the bonds of wedlock. The brother had no children; and as it might probably depend on his junior to carry on the noble line of Wilmot he was to reform, like Falstaff; and if

Audrey Dashwood could be induced to become the prospective mother of future scions of the race, it was felt that her austere virtue and strict Anglicanism would throw a mantle of holiness over the whole thing, which might perhaps be retrospective in its effects. She had been 'told off' to Sir Digby Forester for some time ; but as the baronet showed signs of backwardness in coming forward (owing, as has been seen, to his dread of Mrs. Elliott's tongue and opposition), Colonel Wilmot felt that he had as good a right to aspire to the lady's hand as any other man, especially as Mrs. Elliott favoured his suit. He therefore gradually withdrew his attentions from Violet—in public, or contrived to throw into them such a fraternal meaning as would allow charitable people to believe, if they liked, that he had only paid court to her for the sake of ingratiating himself with her stately sister-in-law.

Violet deeply resented the transfer, delicately and skilfully as Colonel Wilmot managed or tried to manage it. The genial kind,

ness of her military friend had always been a welcome relief after Claude's gloom, and she was highly incensed at his defection to the enemy's camp, for an enemy she considered Audrey.

CHAPTER IV.

MANY people drift apart for want of a kindly word or a timely suggestion from some friend equally attached to both.

Laura felt that if Violet would take a little more interest in her child, Claude would be greatly mollified, and on her own responsibility she resolved to say something to her on the subject.

A day or two after she had dined with her, therefore, she called at an hour when she knew she would find her alone, and gradually introduced the matter, telling her how they had found Claude hearing the little creature say its prayers.

‘He looked such a giant sitting there with the small thing kneeling before him!’ she said, laughing.

Violet was secretly very proud of Claude’s

affection for the child, and she smiled with genuine pleasure as she asked,

‘But did he teach it to say its prayers?’
(She always spoke of ‘it.’) ‘What is the good of that?’

Laura explained that she thought the nurse taught it.

‘I suppose people would say I ought to teach it?’ Violet said after a pause. She was never hard or defiant to Laura.

‘You might hear her say what she has learned, mightn’t you?’ said the latter suggestively.

‘I don’t see the good of it. I never say prayers myself.’

‘Don’t you, dear?’

‘Never, unless I want something awfully badly; then I pray like anything. Didn’t I just pray when St. Clare was ill!’

‘My dear Violet!’ exclaimed Laura, who could not help laughing.

‘I suppose you pray like clockwork, just as Audrey does; but I have no religion, Laura; never had, and never shall have,’

looking at her keenly, as if expecting a protest.

‘Well, I think some people are naturally religious, and some are not religious in their tone of mind,’ returned Laura gently.

‘And you think the people who are not religious a bad lot, as St. Clare would say?’ still watching her face.

‘I don’t indeed. Why should I?’

‘Audrey does. She rushes to church two or three times a day, and “receives,” as she calls it, twice a week, and wears black in Lent, and thinks every one wicked who doesn’t do the same; and she and Claude look on me as a sort of outcast sinner, because I don’t feel what it is not in me to feel,’ bitterly.

‘I think you and Audrey both misunderstand each other,’ said Laura soothingly.

‘I understand her well enough; but I hate her, and I hate her kind of goodness, and I wouldn’t be like her if I could,’ passionate tears springing to her eyes; ‘and I hope the little thing up-stairs won’t be like her either. I wish she hadn’t been called

Audrey. I detest the name, only Claude would have it; and mamma and all of them say it was shameful of him to have insisted on it when I disliked it. If he had cared for me, you would have thought he would have wanted to call her Violet. I can't bear to see her when I think there is only that name to call her by. But I won't call her by it! I never have, and I never will!' This was a very sore subject, and Laura had not foreseen that Violet would touch on it when she spoke of the child. 'You wouldn't have much faith in your husband's affection for you if he called your first child by a name you detested?' went on Violet angrily.

Laura agreed that she would not, and condemned Claude as heartily as his wife could desire. 'But—'

'For heaven's sake don't say "but," Laura! There is not a single extenuating circumstance connected with it. What a bad girl you are thinking me!' With a sudden change of tone: 'And I am a bad girl very often, I do believe, especially in the way of

plaguing poor Claude ; but then he does plague me so, and he ought never to have married me when he didn't care for me ; and it is not my fault that I am bad, for I do believe God makes some people better than others, and that He doesn't expect so much from us poor bad ones. I couldn't be like you if I tried, though I admire your kind of goodness as much as I hate Audrey's. If I could make the little thing like you, I would take some trouble about her ; but I'm so awfully afraid she'll be like Saint Audrey.'

'Vi, you mustn't be so hard on Audrey. You don't know what a kind friend she has been to me.'

'That is the only good thing about her.'

There was a long pause, during which both sat still, looking at the blue sky flecked with white clouds visible from the large window. At last Laura rose to go, when Violet said suddenly,

'Laura, I very often think I shall die soon.'

'You, Vi?'

‘Yes, me. I’m always tired and feeling so weary, and why shouldn’t I die? I’m no use to any one; no one especially cares for me except mamma; and then Claude can marry some one else. He would be an interesting widower for a year—yes, I think he would wait a year—less would hardly be decent, you know; and he would wear very black clothes, and look so handsome and pathetic and all that,—it would be quite touching; and then there would appear Mrs. Claude number two. I hope she would have a better time than I have had,’ tears again springing to her eyes.

Putting her arms round her, Laura kissed her, laughing at her ‘fancies,’ and telling her she would live to see ‘the little thing’s’ children.

‘Shall we have the little thing down and have a look at her?’ asked Violet.

This was more than Laura had hoped for. ‘Oh, do!’ she exclaimed. ‘I should like to see her.’

The bell was rung, and pending the child’s

arrival, Violet said, 'Laura, what a good girl you are! I don't believe you could be bad if you tried. I feel that you are good the moment I come near you, and you make me good in a certain way; but the thing that puzzles me is this; it is not your doing that you are good any more than it is mine that I am bad, as Claude and Audrey think me.'

Laura repudiated the assumption that they thought her bad; but 'the little thing's' arrival put a stop to the 'obstinate questionings' that puzzled poor Violet. The child ran up to her gladly, as she always did when Claude was not there. If he were present she would not go to any one else; and that was one thing that misled him. He never saw the child with its mother, simply because if he was there she would not leave him; and he could not be persuaded that this was not due to the fact that she disliked Violet because she rarely saw her.

After playing with her for a moment or two now Violet suggested that she should repeat her prayers, but to this Miss Dash-

wood strenuously objected, in spite of the nurse's best endeavours. She was used to perform her devotions at stated times; to undertake them at midday, just after her return from her morning walk, was an unorthodox proceeding which she could not tolerate; and when the nurse, gratified by Violet's very unusual interest in her daughter's religious exercises, continued to coax, the young lady insisted on taking off her clothes and having her nightdress brought. She only said 'pa'ers' once a day in full costume; she went through the second performance *en déshabille*, and could not see why the rule should be broken through.

The whole thing amused Violet so much that she laughed till tears rolled down her face; she promised to be present at her daughter's evening orisons, and had her still on her lap when Claude came unexpectedly into the room.

The child put out her arms at once, and jumped down to run to him; but when he took her up he sat down on the sofa beside Violet, asking what she was laughing at, with

a sympathetic smile on his own face. With renewed amusement she told him the story, speaking in her natural bright way, without any of the hard flippancy that had lately marked her manner to him.

‘She’ll be just like Audrey; she will pray like clockwork,’ she said, laughing; ‘only she won’t be like her in another way, for it is plain she won’t want to go to church three times a day.’

The slighting allusion to his sister would have vexed Claude at another time; but now he was too much pleased to hear the child spoken of in connexion with her by Violet to notice it; and when the young lady was carried off to her dinner by him every one was in the most amiable frame of mind. ‘Come back again, Claude,’ said Violet, as he was leaving the room.

He returned, looking delighted. Such trifles make the aggregate of every-day happiness! She had not said anything so conciliatory to him for months, and he hastened to accept terms of peace.

‘Should you like me to ask some man to come to dinner?’ he asked.

This was a sure sign he wished for an amnesty. When he was recovering his equanimity he invariably proposed inviting a stray man to dinner. Whether a suspicion that he was himself but dull company crossed his mind, or whether he thought ‘a man,’ even if only to dinner, the fittest reward for feminine well-doing, it was not easy to determine. In either case the proposal was a sign that he was descending from the heights of marital sulks and dignity to the more serene regions of domestic life. Latterly Violet had not facilitated this descent when he was inclined to make it, but to-day she was gracious.

‘Do,’ she answered. ‘Ask Digby Forester; and, Laura, you will come to dinner too, and then we can have some music. I delight in hearing you and him sing together; your voices were made for each other.’

Laura always winced under these allusions to herself and Digby in conjunction; nor did they seem more welcome to Claude.

‘I doubt if Digby can come,’ he said. ‘He spoke of an engagement.’

He never furthered Laura’s acquaintance or friendship with another man. He did not even like her to dine with them if they had a dinner-party, because then the claims of the married ladies prevented his taking her down himself.

As it happened, Digby called that afternoon, and Violet asked him to dinner. He accepted the invitation, and they had a long evening’s music. No one knew who first suggested *tableaux vivants*, but some one did suggest them, and, as usual, the suggestion grew till the whole party became *tableaux vivants* mad; and so proud were the actors of their success that it was determined to repeat the performance at Oaklands in the coming autumn. But long before that decision had been arrived at, Laura had gone back to Smedston, and her place had to be supplied.

Miss Bingley had come by degrees to form one of the Dashwood-Ellis ‘set.’ She had none of the characteristics which distin-

tinguished the coterie, but Audrey met her so constantly at Lady Emily Carew's that it was impossible to avoid asking her to join them sometimes.

Private theatricals, charades, and *tableaux vivants*, have been especially designed by Providence to convince human beings, if anything could convince them, of their own impracticability. The large, fair, serene woman, all body and no soul, feels a firm conviction that she came into the world to play Beatrice. The dark-eyed impersonation of poetic passion, all soul and no body, is certain she could look to perfection some sleepy-faced, impassive embodiment of repose. The born representative of Cleopatra wishes to be Elizabeth of Hungary; Desdemona is all on fire to be Lady Macbeth.

And the men are harder to deal with than the women, for every man wants to be the chief actor and to have the prettiest woman to act with, and sulks or is sarcastic (when he has the brains to be so) if he can't get precisely all he wants. You may persuade Lady Mac-

beth that she won't do justice to herself as Desdemona ; you can't persuade a man that there is any part in history or fiction to which he is not fully equal at a moment's notice. The same young gentleman insists that he can as adequately represent Don Juan as Sir Galahad, Pizarro as St. Vincent de Paul, and is affronted if his claim is denied.

Violet's troupe was not more reasonable than other troupes. Sir Digby Forester, who would have been an admirable Galahad, chose to be Sir John Falstaff; Miss Bingley, who was as inanimate and insipid-looking as one of Raffael's Madonnas, insisted on being Diana Vernon. But if the result was not pleasing to censorious critics, it was delightful to the actors themselves ; and that, after all, was the chief thing.

CHAPTER V.

LAURA did not take part in any of the preparations for Violet's charades and theatricals, having neither time nor heart for such gaieties. Her brothers were pursuing a course in London more satisfactory to themselves than to their friends, and her father was constantly ailing; but at Claude's earnest request she went over to Oaklands to be present at the last rehearsal but one, and to give her opinion on the arrangements.

To those who have formed their own ideals of certain characters a *tableau* is almost as unsatisfactory as a picture. The actors are so occupied in keeping their pose that they have no time left to think of the feelings which their faces should be expressing.

A young lady and a gentleman stand up as Clärchen and Egmont, when he throws off

his cloak, and the lady's face reveals plainly that her mind is full, not as Clärchen's was, of tender, worshipping, all-absorbing love for her hero-lover, but of the difficulty of reconciling propriety with the necessity of standing in such close proximity to a gentleman—seeming to rest her head on his shoulder while she feels it a matter of conscience not to touch his coat.

So far as expression was concerned the Oaklands *tableaux* were not more successful than others of the sort, though the accessories of dress, &c., were all perfect.

St. Clare Ellis and Audrey as Romeo and Juliet looked as cold and unpoetic as a modern fortune-hunter and the lady who knows that she is bartering her money for his title. Digby Forester was only thinking how he could keep on his feet while he imagined he was King Cophetua wooing the beggar maid — Miss Bingley. The latter young lady got up as the beggar maid was a sight calculated to arrest the attention alike of gods and men; but the crowning disillusion was when she

appeared as Thekla to Claude Dashwood's Max Piccolomini. Claude was about as unfit a representative of the heroic lover of Friedland's daughter as could well have been chosen. He simply could not look as if he would ever have said or felt:

‘What other angel seek I? To this heart,
To this unerring heart I will submit it,’

and turned to a woman as the exponent of the higher way. His profound conviction of her lack of reasoning power, and the knowledge that he could have broken her arm or her back by a couple of kicks or blows, would always have effectually prevented his listening to her. His dress was perfect, his figure and pose heroic enough. But when it came to his face! He was Petruchio bullying Katherine, or Claudio slandering Hero,—not the chivalrous and tender Piccolomini.

He was hardly worse as Max than Miss Bingley as Thekla.

‘What do you think of it?’ Digby asked Laura.

‘It is frightful!’ was her emphatic rejoinder.

The baronet always agreed with the last opinion he heard, unless he was talking to Audrey. In her case, with an eye to post-nuptial warfare, he usually made some show of holding his own. Till Laura spoke he had not thought the *tableau* bad at all. Now he was convinced that it was execrable, and said he had always been against Miss Bingley’s taking the part.

‘She couldn’t look like Thekla,’ said Laura, ‘or enter into her mind. What does she know or care about the value of a principle? She would have told Max not to be a fool, and to see that the settlements were properly drawn up.’

‘Of course she would!’ said the acquiescent Digby.

‘What a Thekla you would make!’ he continued, looking at her.

‘No; I shouldn’t be a good Thekla; but I wish she would let me tell her how she ought to do it!’ Laura exclaimed, throwing herself,

with all the enthusiasm of her artistic nature, into the subject.

‘But so you can; or better still—take the part yourself. Here, St. Clare, Audrey!’

Before Laura had time to think of what Miss Bingley would feel at being tutored in this unjustifiable manner, she found herself standing by Claude as Thekla. Had not caste and other prejudices made such a thing an impossibility, Miss Erle might have enabled her family to live in affluence by her powers as an actress.

There was a musical accompaniment to each *tableau*, and, carried away by it and by the artistic impulse so strong within her, she forgot herself, Miss Bingley, every one and everything around her. She was no longer Laura Erle. She was Thekla in that hour of mortal trial, seeing her mother’s eyes of agonised silent entreaty, hearing her aunt’s cry, ‘Think of your father!’ feeling round her her lover’s arm, meeting his gaze as he said, ‘Then I must leave thee, must part from thee;’ and winning in the strife the God-given

courage to say, 'True to thyself, thou still art true to me. Away! quick, quick!' Even Claude's cold, unsympathetic air could not mar the poetic and noble beauty of the picture.

There was a momentary silence — every one being too much surprised to speak—then a burst of vociferous applause. All thought of Miss Bingley as Thekla was henceforth at an end. The gentlemen would not hear of any one but Laura, and were so open in their expression of opinion on the subject that Miss Bingley, highly and justly offended, refused to take any further part in the proceedings.

She had been unanimously selected for the part on account of her golden hair, that being, in the estimation of the managers, about the chief requisite for a Thekla—of course all German maidens have golden hair—and how could she know that all this poetry and romantic passion were to be required of her? She thought both, as displayed by Laura, 'quite improper,' and would have been very sorry to 'show herself off' in that way

before people, especially with Claude Dashwood—her old lover.'

Miss Bingley's innuendoes were uncharitable; Laura would have acted in the same way had her gifted brother John been in Claude's place; but both Mrs. Bingley and her daughter had just cause of complaint. The whole thing was the rudest that could have been done, though such a thought as depriving Miss Bingley of her part had never entered Laura's head. She spoke on the impulse of the moment, and was deeply distressed and ashamed when she found what the result of her hasty exclamation was likely to be.

She apologised in the amplest manner both to Miss Bingley and to her mother; but no apology could, as she felt, atone for the rudeness of which she had been guilty, nor was she surprised that her excuses were accepted with ironical politeness.

She absolutely refused to take Miss Bingley's place at first, but this raised such an outcry that she and Audrey decided, on consideration, that the one grand mistake having

been made the best course now was to do as she was requested with as little fuss as possible. But after such an unpleasant incident good acting was out of the question. Miss Bingley had been rudely treated, but she certainly did not bear the treatment with equanimity, and was so altogether disagreeable that her presence disturbed Laura's 'feelings' as much as that of the coarse and ill-bred Johnson did those of poor Garrick.

At the dress-rehearsal she was as unlike Schiller's Thekla as Claude was unlike his Max.

When the scene was over she went into the room which had been fitted up for the spectators. It was dark, and she hoped to be able to sit down quietly and avoid observation, feeling weary, and altogether ashamed of herself and her own folly. She was resting in an arm-chair which had been thrust into a corner, when a voice beside her made her start violently.

'How do you do, Miss Erle? I came over here to see you act.'

The directness of the remark could only proceed from Harold Carew. He did not offer to shake hands, but stood looking down at her with an air almost of menace in his whole bearing. She could not clearly see his face, but she saw enough to be aware that there was no genial light in his eyes nor smile on his lips. Much surprised she answered, without rising,

‘Then you came to see what was not worth seeing. I did it very badly.’

‘Then why did you do it at all?’ he exclaimed angrily.

Before she could answer Claude came up.

‘Laura, they want that scene again.’

He hurried her off in the imperious way characteristic of him; and Harold stood looking after her through the gloom, his sternest and most unprepossessing expression on his face.

‘I wish it was over! I can’t do it,’ said Laura.

‘Why not?’ in an affronted voice. ‘You can do it as well as you did before.’

‘No; I’m not in the mood for it; and you don’t help me a bit. You are such a bad Max, Claude.’

‘Am I? I’m sorry,’ loftily.

‘Why don’t you look as if you knew I should tell you what was right, and you meant to believe it?’ rather indignantly.

‘I’ll do my best to look as you tell me; but it seems rather unreasonable to blame me because your acting does not come up to your own conception of your part,’ returned the unfortunate Claude, whose masculine faith in his own perfections had been so rudely shaken during the last two years that he was beginning to accept with comparative docility the snubbings administered to him with such frequency by the inferior part of the creation.

The repeated scene was a greater failure than the first; but as the world at Oaklands had made up its mind that Laura and Laura only could ‘do Thekla,’ she might have stood with her eyes shut, and they would have applauded all the same.

When she was again at liberty she looked

round for Harold; but he was gone—at least, she could not see him anywhere. Had he been there she would, probably, not have spoken to him; yet she felt annoyed and disappointed at not finding him, and went up to her room vaguely disturbed and anxious. (The acting was to be followed by a ball; and Mrs. Ellis had asked her to stay at Oaklands during the festivities.) Why had he spoken in that tone of her ‘acting’? Did he think her wrong to act, if standing up in a *tableau* could be so called? She could hardly think that. She had certainly shown both want of tact and want of thought towards Miss Bingley; but even had it been likely that he would make himself Miss Bingley’s champion, he would not, she was sure, condemn her severely for that which was only an error of judgment.

That he should disapprove of her acting with Claude was an idea which did not once present itself to her mind. Claude was an accident in the affair. She would have done just the same had he not been there; so she

never sought a solution in that direction at all.

The fable of the fox and the grapes is of wide application. Unable to find a reason, satisfactory or otherwise, for his anger, Miss Erle wondered at herself for letting it disturb her. What was he to her? Had she not deliberately refused to give him any share in her life? All the same, she knew that nothing in the world had ever gratified her so much as his good opinion.

She had had a large share of that intoxicating homage which men pay to a girl clever, natural, and with that indefinable something about her which can best be described as 'charm.' Only her kind heart and strong sense had kept her head from being turned by the never-ceasing incense offered up to her; but no incense had ever gratified her so much as Harold's approval and delicately-expressed or implied admiration. The rest she had accepted much as a matter of course. Even Claude's preference, manifested in passionate and often imperious fashion, had never awoke

in her the exquisite poetic delight and pride which Mr. Carew's simple, but more worthy, appreciation called forth. When she felt that she could not honestly accept his love, she had yet been proud of his having offered it; and if she could not return it, she would never do anything to render herself unworthy of it. It was not doing so to take part in a *tableau*: her common sense told her that; but something which was not common sense made her shed a few tears, in the strict privacy of her apartment, at his 'unreasonableness;' and then, with true consistency, having made herself duly miserable, she determined to defy him. She would act whether he liked it or not—and act well.

There is no stimulus to the faculties of some people like a little wholesome dash of defiance. The Bingley episode had 'disturbed her feelings;' Harold's menacing and angry tone acted as a counter-irritant; and she would now show him how very little she cared what he said or thought.

Just as she reached this admirable conclu-

sion, there was a knock at her door; and Mrs. Ellis, looking worn and anxious, came in.

‘My dear Laura, I do want to know if you found an opportunity of saying anything to Claude,’ she began as she sat down by the fire.

Laura’s thoughts were so far away from Claude and his affairs at that moment, that it needed almost a physical effort to bring them back to them.

‘No; I’m sorry to say I didn’t; but to-morrow I may be able to do something.’

‘Do try, Laura. I am so uneasy about Violet. I am sure she is not well, though she persists that she is; and she does dread this going to Ireland so. You see, Claude minds what you say.’

Laura promised to do her best to get Claude to give up a visit to Ireland in October, on which he had set his heart, and against which Violet had as violently set hers.

‘But it is not very easy to introduce the subject *à propos* of nothing,’ she pleaded.

‘I have so relied on you,’ said Mrs. Ellis,

looking despairingly into the fire, as though Laura had refused to do anything. 'I don't know how it is that I feel so much for Violet; whether it is that her being married brings her nearer to me or what,—but my life seems bound up with hers. It is sometimes just as if I had no other child; and when I see her pale and fretted, and always quarrelling with Claude, it simply breaks my heart,' in a voice of keen misery, which effectually brought Laura back from dreamland to the prosaic reality of every-day trials.

Sympathising with her deeply, she again promised to use her influence with Claude.

Mrs. Ellis liked Laura. The two had had several confidential conversations on the subject of those domestic differences between Claude and Violet which had now become so open that they constituted a deep source of anxiety to Mrs. Ellis, and a common topic of conversation. In almost every family there is one child who seems in some mysterious way to have wound himself or herself round the

mother's heart. She loves all dearly, would sacrifice herself equally for all; but this one, why she cannot tell, appeals to her as none of the others do, influences her as the others cannot, touches a fibre which they have never reached. As a baby its cries affected her as those of her other children did not, and could not; as man or woman, she feels the joys or sorrows of this one child as she does not feel those of the others. Violet was this darling of Mrs. Ellis's heart. Far beneath the surface this worldly woman had depths of softness and tenderness, as fresh and beautiful as though she had never made herself a mark for the gibes and scoffs of 'detrimentals.' She had acted according to her lights; and, in spite of all that has (often most unjustly) been said of the evil influence of mothers-in-law, she had never given other than good advice to Claude and Violet.

She had done her best to make the crooked straight and the rough places plain for both; and it had been a heartbreaking thing to her to see the two drift further and

further apart from one cause or another ; and latterly, when Violet, looking pale and tired, used to fix her blue eyes on her appealingly, complaining of fatigue, or uttering some impatient word about Claude, Mrs. Ellis underwent sharp spasms of agony.

If Violet should die ! And then the mother would seek earnestly in her mind for some way of bringing about a better state of things between them. If that could be done, Violet would be happier, and might perhaps grow stronger. Seeing Laura's influence over both her and Claude, she determined to utilise it. She never despised or neglected any means that came to her hand, and was now sure that during the course of the next day and evening, when 'you will all be dancing and talking and laughing together, my dear, you will be able to find an opportunity of saying a word to Claude so as to counteract Audrey's influence, which is always used against my darling Vi.'

CHAPTER VI.

‘Did you see Harold Carew last night?’ Audrey asked Laura the following morning.

‘Yes, for a moment ; I just spoke to him. How did he come here?’

‘Digby met him at Hillingdon, and drove him over. Your treatment of him has changed him from a *célibataire* into a misanthrope. He won’t speak even to a man now. If you had heard the tone of disgust in which Digby said, “I asked him to come to Glynton, but he prefers putting up at a public-house in the town!”’

‘A public-house!’

‘That is how Digby describes the Glynton Arms, the hotel sacred to his family from time immemorial,’ said Audrey, laughing. ‘He is so angry with Harold for going there, and says it is a reflection on his own hospitality.’

‘But what brought him here?’

‘My dear, I am surprised at your obtuseness. Digby naturally gave him the county news, naming among other items your success as Thekla. As Amy is fond of reminding you, Mr. Carew is an admirer of Schiller, and was anxious of course to see your rendering of his most celebrated heroine. The rest is soon told; he came—he saw—we conclude, but no one knows; for he only spoke to Frances Bingley, and she declines to reveal anything. One other thing is certain; instead of waiting for Digby, he went off by himself, and either walked back to Hillingdon, or drowned himself in the lake.’

‘Not the last, I hope, for Lady Emily’s sake.’

‘Providentially, Mrs. Ellis saw him, and asked him to come again this evening. Being a bachelor at large, he is too valuable to be lost sight of. If he escapes between her and Frances Bingley, it will be a wonder.’

‘Audrey, you are too hard on Mrs. Ellis, and on Vi too. I must say, I think you are

wrong about this Irish visit; Vi hates it, yet you encourage Claude in going.'

'The only thing he cares for in the year! And he is to give it up, because Violet chooses to dislike Ireland, which she knows nothing of!'

'He needn't give it up; he might go, and leave her here.'

'I simply have no patience with Violet,' exclaimed Audrey angrily.

It was not easy to influence her on the subject of her sister-in-law—the natural antagonism between the two being so strong and so reciprocal.

The Irish visit was a sore subject, the more so because Mrs. Elliott had interfered in Violet's behalf, declaring that she was quite right in refusing to go to such 'a God-forgotten place as Ireland'—a remark which infuriated Claude and Audrey. Altogether, the affair had assumed the dimensions of a very pretty family quarrel, in which Laura much doubted whether interference would do any good; but she had promised Mrs. Ellis to

speaking to Claude, and could not but try what her influence would effect.

The *tableaux* were a brilliant success. It was unanimously admitted that every one had surpassed him or herself. Partly from a desire to convince Mr. Carew and the world, and especially herself, that she did not attach the slightest value to his opinion, partly from excitement and real artistic feeling, Miss Erle as Thekla brought down 'the house,' as represented by the company assembled in the hall at Oaklands.

She began amiably by resolving to defy Harold, should he be among the company; she ended by forgetting him, herself, every one, and everything but her part, and this forgetfulness it was that made her so successful.

But though she had for the moment forgotten Harold, he had not forgotten her. He had come to Oaklands again to see her, and was watching her from a corner by a door, through which she must pass when she came out. Miss Bingley was sitting by him. She

spoke to him from time to time ; but, judging by the effect they produced on him, the remarks she made cannot have been of a very soothing nature. He looked unprepossessing and gloomy — his face being pale, his lips firmly compressed.

He had not placed himself there with any definite intention of speaking to Laura ; but when he saw her come forward, the light from the door streaming in on her, as she stood flushed with the pride of her triumph, smiling her acknowledgments of the congratulations she received on all sides, he could not resist the impulse to say something to her.

Digby and Claude were with her. Why should he give her up to them without a struggle ? Her smile he thought the sweetest he had ever seen — her eyes smiled as well as her lips—it had always charmed and softened him, and it did so now.

She saw him as he came down the steps into the light, and at once made a move forward as if to speak to him. She had forgotten her anger and defiance, and was conscious

only of that longing for his approval which lay deep in her heart.

‘I did it better that time!’ she said, looking up at him with the frank openness of a child who asks ‘Have I been good?’

His face softened. He could not but see that she was thinking only of her part.

‘You did,’ he said gravely. ‘It was admirable.’

‘Did it at all come up to your idea of Thekla?’

As she asked the question, Miss Bingley, who had come forward, gave a little laugh—scornful, sneering. It brought Laura back from the poetic world of art to Oaklands, and the recollection of how she had come to be acting Thekla, and wishing for Harold Carew’s approval. She blushed up, and with a stammered ‘I beg your pardon,’ and a look at him half of deprecation, half of defiance, turned away.

‘It must be a great thing to have so much confidence in oneself, as Miss Erle has,’ she heard Miss Bingley say as she went. She

did not hear Harold's abrupt answer, 'She is not self-confident;' nor did she see the look—partly of grief, partly of anger—on his face as he saw her take Claude's arm.

'Of course it looked horrid of me to have asked him that question,' was her reflection, as she moved away.

The charades were over, rather to the regret of the actors, who would not have objected to a repetition of the whole thing. The ladies especially would willingly have gone through the performance again, and Digby wished that it had only been a first rehearsal when he stood up as Ravenswood plighting his troth to Audrey as Lucy Ashton.

Dancing seemed a tame affair after all that excitement; and dancing gave every one time to think over his or her individual troubles, which had been forgotten while the actors had been busy representing the troubles of others. But, outwardly, all was brightness and gaiety. The floor was good, the music perfect; there were many more gentlemen than ladies—a point Mrs. Ellis

always insisted on. No one saw Black Care stalking about among the dancers ; only those at whose hearts she was gnawing knew that she was there—unrelenting, unappeasable. Mrs. Ellis knew it, and Mrs. Elliott. One was grieving for the child, who—a wife and a mother—found neither rest nor content in being so. The other was full of angry anxiety because it was plain that Audrey would not accept the hand Colonel Wilmot was eagerly holding out ; she would neither dance with him, nor speak to him, nor have anything to do with him, in spite of all Mrs. Elliott's efforts.

Before the night was over, the elder and younger lady had a stormy interview on the subject, during which Audrey displayed more courage and firmness than she usually did in her encounters with Mrs. Elliott.

‘Why don't you dance with Colonel Wilmot?’ asked the latter angrily. ‘He has asked you four times, and you have only given him one dance. I insist on your giving him the next.’

‘I can’t, aunt Eleanor. I mean, I won’t. I feel I don’t know what, when he touches me.’

‘Let us have no heroics. I command you—’

‘It is useless; indeed, I can’t,’ and she glanced at Digby, who was standing near. She had had her first little difference with him that evening—it could not be called a quarrel—it lasted only a minute; but to Audrey, unused to have the sunshine of her love dimmed by any cloud, it had been as a terrible tempest. The misery of a life seemed concentrated into a moment when Digby turned away from her in anger.

‘Why don’t you dance with Colonel Wilmot?’ Mrs. Elliott asked.

‘Why do you dance with Wilmot, Audrey?’ Digby asked, coming up to her just as she was sitting down after a performance with that gentleman. ‘I did not think you would do that sort of thing.’

‘I could not help it, Digby; he asked me.’

‘Asked you! And if he asked you to marry him, would you do it?’

‘Digby!’

‘Then you shouldn’t dance with him.’

‘How can I help it?’ imploringly, as a cloud came over his face. ‘He keeps on asking me, and aunt Eleanor goes on so. I am engaged to him for the next valse,’ hurriedly, as if wishing to let him know the worst.

‘In that case, of course, I have no more to say,’ turning away with an offended air.

‘Oh, Digby!’ she cried entreatingly, while sudden tears sprang to her eyes, and a suffocating sensation in her throat almost deprived her of the power of utterance.

The sight of her tears quenched his short-lived anger.

‘I think you should not dance with him,’ he said, in a tone which was a caress.

‘Then I will not ; I wish to do what you wish—what is right,’ with difficulty commanding her voice.

‘Shall I take you away till the valse is

over?' She took his arm by way of answer. 'You are engaged to me for every dance he asks for,' Digby said presently, bending his head over her.

It was this that gave Audrey courage to face Mrs. Elliott.

Colonel Wilmot saw all that was going on, and knew perfectly what Audrey's subsequent disappearance implied; but he was not discouraged or disturbed. It was business, not love, or even passion, that was prompting him, so he could wait. He continued to ask for dances which she continued to refuse, and at supper-time he meant to lay his proposal before her. She would decline it at first, he knew,—he was prepared for that,—but he would renew it at some future time. He was fortified by Mrs. Elliott's consent, and that was of more importance than the young lady's, he thought. Young ladies have been known to change their minds.

Mrs. Elliott saw it all too, and was very angry; the more so because she felt her anger to be ineffectual. Audrey's sudden courage in

defying her made her almost desperate. For a time there was no sort of coercion, moral or physical, which she was not ready to employ for the subjugation of her rebellious niece. She felt all the fierce quick rage of a despot who sees a creature, hitherto meekly submissive, suddenly assert independence. There is much surprise in that rage, and much fear—fear of the unknown.

When Colonel Wilmot found he could not dance with Audrey, he would willingly have consoled himself with Violet, but she would not take a second place. The dream was over for her; the romance of life was broken in upon and vulgarised, and she was weary and dispirited, and despairing too. The dread of that approaching visit to Ireland hung over her like a horror of great darkness. It helped to deaden the mortification she felt at Dick's defection, and the weariness of life that was creeping over her, because Claude neither loved nor trusted her, as she believed.

Beautiful Ireland! Violet hated it without knowing it—hated it because she had al-

ways heard it vilified and reviled by people who did not know it either, and because it was there she had first realised what a dull thing life would be with Claude for a companion—Claude, who was always gloomy and exacting, and thinking of his rights as a man and a husband, instead of being gay and genial and winning, like her father and brothers and Dick.

Violet hated the place where she had made that discovery. She had gone to Ireland for a fortnight a few months after her marriage, and though Claude's relations there had loaded her with kindness, she carried away painful recollections of the country.

To-night her heart was full of sorrow and bitterness, and a great weariness seemed to be weighing down her limbs, while diamonds were glittering in her hair and on her fair neck, and her eyes looked large and wistful as she watched Claude dancing with Laura, or talking to her earnestly when they were not dancing, and Dick 'going in' for Audrey and respectability. Violet hated respectability and

all belonging to it; and it is often enough deserving of very cordial-hatred, it is so cold and so hypocritical, and so unutterably mean and cruel and base.

While Violet was watching Claude and Laura another person was watching them too. Harold Carew certainly looked out of his element in a ballroom, yet there he had stood by the door for hours, with his arms folded, not dancing, not speaking to any one, only watching Laura, with an ever-deepening gloom on his face as she danced with Claude, with Digby, with St. Clare Ellis, then with Claude again and yet again—oftener with him than with any one else. She looked beautiful, Harold thought, as she moved about among the moving figures, smiling, talking, blushing; she was very much given to colouring-up suddenly for no apparent reason, just as if she had been only seventeen, and she used to look exceedingly pretty when she blushed up in this way,—in his eyes at least.

She danced for the sake of dancing, and would have found it an impossibility to sit

through a 'round.' She was very particular too about the performances of her partners, giving the preference always to a good dancer. She and Claude had trodden so many measures together that they knew each other's step exactly. He danced well, and that was the secret of the unusual number of vales she gave him on this night. She was also anxious to speak to him about Violet.

But Harold knew nothing of all this. How should he?

As Laura was sitting by Mrs. Ellis he suddenly left his post by the door and went up to her.

'Miss Erle, will you dance the next dance with me?' he asked abruptly.

'Dance? With you?' said Laura, with uncivil amazement.

'Yes, with me. Is there anything extraordinary in that?'

'I did not know you ever danced.'

'Will you dance with me?' he repeated.

'Certainly; only I am engaged for so many now.'

‘Will you dance with me the first you are not engaged for?’

‘It is a mazurka—’

‘That will do. When will it come?’

‘The next after this.’

‘I will come for you;’ and he returned to his post by the door.

Laura could not get over her surprise. Harold Carew dancing a mazurka! ‘But it is better than standing staring at me as he has been doing all the evening,’ she thought.

At the time appointed he appeared.

‘Will you take my arm, Miss Erle?’ he asked, not as if he had been about to lead her to a dance, but to execution.

She complied, and he turned into a conservatory opening out of the ballroom.

Unable to divine what his look meant, ‘We can’t dance here!’ she said, more from nervousness than anything else.

‘I am not going to dance; I should have thought you knew that,’ he answered in a voice more nervous than her own.

‘What is it?’ she asked, withdrawing her

hand from his arm and standing still. He turned and faced her, a look of half-nervous resolution still on his dark face. They made a tableau in themselves as they stood opposite each other among the flowers.

‘I cannot see you go on in this way, bellying all that is best and noblest in yourself, and not say one word to warn you,’ began Harold abruptly. ‘You may think it a liberty. I have no right, I know, except the right that every human being has to warn another who is standing on the brink of a precipice; it must be madness—infatuation—’

‘What?’ said Laura, in profound astonishment.

‘Surely you must see—must be aware; nothing but the deep respect and regard, not to speak of anything else, I feel for you would induce me to venture on a word. He is more to blame than you are.’

Before Laura could arrive at his meaning Digby and Audrey came suddenly on them, so absorbed in each other as to be scarcely conscious who the two they interrupted

were. Harold cast an impatient glance at them.

‘I must speak to you. Will you walk on with me?’ he said.

Lost in surprise, Laura went on. Half an hour afterwards she joined Audrey in the ball-room, leaving Claude for a moment to speak to her. She had come in with Harold, but at the door met Claude, who was looking out for her. She was engaged to him for the coming dance.

‘And you will dance with him again after all I have said?’ Harold remonstrated.

‘I must; I am engaged to him; it would be absurd not,’ she answered, still not half taking in what he meant.

‘I am more grieved at your infatuation than I ever was at anything in my life,’ he said; ‘but I can do no more.’

He looked pale, angry, and miserable. Laura, flushed and altogether in a state of surprise, took Claude’s arm mechanically.

‘I want to speak to Audrey,’ she said to him.

‘What is it?’ asked Audrey, seeing her come up. ‘I’m afraid we disturbed you. Have you settled everything comfortably?’

‘Settled everything! I think the world is gone mad!—the masculine part of it, certainly,’ returned Laura, in a puzzled, half-angry, half-ashamed way. ‘There is Claude savage because, he says, I kept him waiting, and Harold Carew has been lecturing me for the last half-hour for—what do you think?’

‘What?’

‘Flirting with Claude. I!’

‘Flirting with Claude?’

‘Yes; you would have thought, to hear him talk, that I had committed, or was going to commit, every crime that ever was thought of.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘Say! I was so amazed I could not say a word, but stood there meekly while he scolded me in good set terms for ten minutes. I, a grown-up young lady, all in my beautiful long-trained dress, looped-up with blush roses;’ and Laura laughed protestingly, but tears came rising to her eyes.

‘It was excessively impertinent of him,’ said Audrey indignantly.

‘Excessively; and yet it wasn’t, because he was so in earnest about me and so distressed. Only it was so horrid! To be accused of blighting poor Vi’s life!’

‘But what could he mean?’

‘He is shocked at my having acted with Claude; shocked at my dancing with him so much.’

‘But didn’t you explain to him?’

‘My dear, I don’t know what I explained, or what I didn’t. I couldn’t make out what he meant at first; he went on apologising and talking about respect and belief and all that, and then, when his meaning at last dawned on me and I tried to make him understand, he got angry and poured forth on me a dozen vials full of righteous indignation.’

‘You should have come away.’

‘Come away! You talk as if one always had one’s wits about one, Audrey,’ impatiently. ‘Mine invariably go wool-gathering when I want them. How could I come away when I

didn't know whether I was on my own feet or not? If you were suddenly attacked, and accused of doing something you abhorred and had never even thought of doing, you mightn't find it so easy to come away. Of course, I know he was impertinent; and I should have looked at him with repressive dignity and told him so, or else have thanked him calmly for the interest he took in my affairs, so that he would have felt nowhere. You would have done so. I needn't say I didn't.'

'What did you do?'

'Stood still, like a fool, and listened as long as he chose to scold me, and then took his arm quite meekly when he told me to do so, because a lot of people came crowding in.'

'You had better explain to him that he is mistaken.'

'I sha'n't; I sha'n't speak to him again,' angrily; 'he might have known me better! The absurdity of it all! I, who was acting from the most purely philanthropic motives all in Vi's behalf, and at Mrs. Ellis's request; and Laura laughed a laugh half anger, half

scorn, in which, however, there was much sorrow. 'There, he is looking at us now,' she went on; 'he knows I am telling you; he knows I tell you everything. He once asked me if I did.'

Harold was standing at his old post by the door again, and Claude's patience was exhausted by this time; he had been waiting for Laura while she spoke to Audrey, but would wait no longer.

'Laura, are you ready? What weighty secret have you there? Do come.'

The band struck up *Il Bacio*, and the two went off together.

Harold watched them for some time, a look of bitter disappointment and anger on his face. Once his eyes and Laura's met. She coloured very deeply and averted her glance.

After that he left the room, and she saw no more of him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ball broke up at last; but before it was over, Laura had gone up to her room. She could not bear the glare and noise and movement any longer. Her heart was in a storm of anger, grief, regret. Why had Harold doubted her—accused her of such a hideous wrong — one from which her whole soul shrank back, as from a loathsome thing—thought her capable of being disloyal to Violet, her friend, who trusted her?

She gave Claude the very last dance he asked for, doing it to justify herself in her own eyes, and then went to say good-night to Violet.

‘Good-night, dear; I am so tired, I can’t bear any more of this,’ kissing her.

‘You have been dancing ever so much with Claude,’ Violet said.

‘Yes, did you mind?’

Laura asked the question almost defiantly.

‘Mind? I don’t mind anything much. He would not be such a fool as to dance with his wife, would he?’

But Violet’s pretty eyes had a weary longing look in them, which Laura noticed, because she had never seen it there before.

‘Harold Carew took me dreadfully to task for dancing with him,’ she said, rather recklessly.

Violet’s whole face changed.

‘Then some one does feel for me?’ Her looks said that as plainly as possible, and Laura saw that they did. In words she answered:

‘Did he? That was nice of him.’

‘Then you did mind?’ Laura exclaimed, feeling as if some terrible blow had fallen on her.

‘I didn’t, because it was you,’ Violet returned in a frank way. ‘I might have minded if it had been any one else.’

‘Violet, I will never forgive myself. I did not think—’

Violet kissed her. ‘Laura, the reason I get on with you so well is that you are so honest. You don’t try to make shams look like truth. We are always honest with each other. I know all about your dancing with Claude. *He* likes to dance with you—not you with him—so don’t let us make any mystery about it. Claude, you see, is—Claude; and a great stickler for truth and duty—in other people, women especially. That is understood between us; I daresay he is no worse than others, though mamma says the worse men are themselves, the harder they are on women—it is always a sign.’

Laura did not know all that was in Violet’s heart, and could not understand her drift; but she felt that her own actions at least, if not her motives, were open to misconstruction, and went up-stairs all ablaze with shame, sorrow, repentance, and the fierce resentment of one who feels that she has been wrongfully accused.

In her inmost soul she felt innocent in this matter. She could honestly plead that before her own conscience; still she had not been blameless. To God we can say, 'Behold my motive;' to human creatures like ourselves we are answerable for our actions too. And why had she not justified herself to Harold Carew?

Laura's thought always came too late to be of any use to her. She was wise only after the event; and Harold, without knowing it, had taken a bad time for his grave stern remonstrance.

The music, the light, the movement had excited her; when she was dancing with a good partner every nerve quivered with an ecstasy of emotion; and in this delirious passion of enjoyment she was little prepared for his serious words and thoughts; her laughter-loving nature was moved at the idea of his proposing to dance a mazurka with her, and when he spoke suddenly in those tones of passionate yet deferential

pleading—as if entreating her not to destroy the ideal of goodness he had set up in his heart—her mind was so ill-attuned to such a grave note, that she listened lightly at first, too lightly to suit his deep feeling at the moment. He had not resolved to address a warning to her on the subject without serious consideration. He saw Claude untiring in his devotion to her; he saw her acting and dancing with him; Miss Bingley, not unnaturally angry and sore, had given utterance to some innuendoes. What could he think but that Laura, impulsive, volatile, impassioned, had let herself be carried away by an infatuation—a powerful temptation. He believed he saw now the real reason of her having rejected his own offer:

‘Music, when soft voices die,
Vibrates in the memory.’

Should he not say one word to warn her back? She was only led astray for a moment, and the divine light within her but obscured temporarily by a light which was in

itself a light from heaven. A timely word might recall her to herself. He liked her too unselfishly not to speak that word, even if it should be to his own injury.

When she received his warning with apparent levity his disappointment and grief took the form of anger, as Laura thought; and he was himself unaware, probably, of the severity with which he spoke to her. Every word came back to her now with redoubled force, and she was very angry. He should have known her better than to think her, even in her secret soul, guilty of such wrongdoing; but before many hours were over, anger was not the predominant feeling in her mind. It had given place to sorrow that she should, even inadvertently, have done anything to lessen his esteem for her. She knew what it was to have her faith in one in whom she had believed destroyed. That is the real 'death in life.' Why had she not had courage and presence of mind enough to spare him that pang? He was not hard, like Claude,

or exacting, expecting much and giving little. She could easily have offered him such an explanation as would fully have justified her in his eyes.

More golden opportunities are lost from want of ready presence of mind than from aught else. From nervousness, from passing pride, from shyness, we let the happy moment go, and then we live on vain regrets—unless we can solace ourselves with resolves, made too often only to be broken through our weakness, that we will be wiser in the future. What a treasury of hope and consolation that future is! We trust in it and hope in it, and it is always before us.

Laura solaced herself now. She would see Harold to-morrow; somehow or other she would contrive to do that; and would then tell him, make him understand—awkwardly it might be, but surely—that he need not cease to believe in her; she would confess that she had been foolish, perhaps, but not wrong, as he had thought. But to-

morrow came, and to-morrow again, and yet again, and she saw no more of him. She learned afterwards that he had left Hillingdon early the morning after the ball.

CHAPTER VIII.

COLONEL WILMOT, in accordance with the plan he had sketched out for himself, laid before Miss Dashwood the various equivalents he had it in his power to offer her in exchange for her youth, her beauty, and, above all, her respectability.

These equivalents were a hand and a heart, both rather the worse for wear—to put it mildly—a title some way off in the future, and the immediate honour of being a married, not a single, woman. That was surely something.

He made the offer in the dining-room at Oaklands on the night of the ball, with Mrs. Elliott sitting near, hoping to awe her niece into compliance by her mere presence and the force of her eye. Stronger girls than Audrey have bent before such moral per-

suaders as the eye and presence of one to whom submission has become a habit. But Audrey had a potent shield against such persuaders—the intense repulsion she felt for a man of Colonel Wilmot's character, and her love for Digby.

She refused the future peer's offer in trenchant terms: such as would leave him, she hoped, no excuse for renewing it. Mrs. Elliott was very angry; but when it came to a regular battle Audrey could be strong. It is easy to be so once the engagement has begun. The difficult thing is to be strong without coming to an engagement. She had need of all her strength; for not only had she refused Colonel Wilmot—she had also accepted Digby Forester, and she had to make that announcement to her aunt.

Audrey hardly knew how the engagement had come about, neither did Digby. On the preceding night, when she had been divided between fear of Mrs. Elliott's anger and Colonel Wilmot's persevering audacity, a thought had come to her heart straight from Digby's.

Why should she fear, or doubt, or be perplexed? She did not belong to herself, but to that other far dearer life.

Hardly any words were spoken. There are feelings too deep for expression. Silence is the seal we set to the most solemn contracts of our lives.

‘You are engaged to me for every dance he can ask for,’ Digby had said to her; and when Colonel Wilmot, smiling and solicitous, came forward again, she told him she was engaged and took Digby’s arm. The two walked in silence into the conservatory, where flowers hung like jewels among the dark green leaves, and the music came softened—rising and falling like the waves in their ceaseless motion.

When they got to the end, he placed his hand for a moment on the one resting on his arm, as if to draw her attention to himself. Their eyes met for a moment, and then hers fell. They understood each other. It was the old story, and there was no need for words. They went back, and the Digby and Audrey

whom people saw and to whom they spoke walked about and danced and talked like the rest of the world,—the real Digby and Audrey were in some region far away, where were

‘The consecration and the poet’s dream.’

As in a dream they moved and came upon Harold and Laura standing opposite each other; Laura’s sweet bright face, with a burning blush on it, and a puzzled half-amused expression—Harold, dark and stern, not knowing why she should be amused, and thinking just then that he would give his life to save her. It was all like a dream to Audrey, too, when Laura came up afterwards, and told her how Harold had ‘scolded her’ in the bitterness of his love and his disappointment. But it was no dream when she told Colonel Wilmot she could never be his wife; nor was it a dream—but the poetic realisation of one—when Digby, as he was saying good-night, pressed his lips for one brief moment on her hand, whispering:

‘Say nothing to Mrs. Elliott till to-morrow; then I will help you to tell her.’

So that night she could give up to poetry and joy and dreams. The morrow would bring its earthly freight of prose—of announcements to the world and the world's wife, of congratulations from indifferent lips on the happiness which Audrey felt to be almost too sacred to dwell on, even in her inmost heart—smiles, jests, settlements, and—Mrs. Elliott.

Ecstasies of joy and sorrow dwell together under the same roof. While Laura was hiding her face in her hands—ashamed of the moonlight which came streaming in on her—Audrey was standing by her window, and in the light of that same moon striving to realise her great happiness; and Violet, looking out by chance, saw an owl go by, and shrank as she heard his mournful note. Audrey had forgotten now all about that white one she had seen once at Enleigh. She saw this one and heard him, but did not shrink or draw back in fear; for no sight or sound is of itself of evil omen. The fear and the dread are in our own hearts. Digby had chivalrously said that he would help her to tell her

secret to Mrs. Elliott; but though his intentions were good, performance was not an easy matter. The lady wore her most sardonic expression at breakfast, and it was impossible to say what her line of attack might be.

She had come to stay at Oaklands for a week; she now said, quite suddenly, that she was going back to Enleigh at once. This was her first move. If Audrey would not marry Colonel Wilmot, she should not stay where Digby Forester could pay court to her.

‘Oh, Digby, aunt Eleanor insists on going home, and now I shall never see you!’ exclaimed poor Audrey in despair.

Digby was so nervous that he did nothing but cough and throw his head back.

‘I think I’ll go and quarrel with Wilmot, and knock him down, eh?’ he said to Audrey, as if that would be a tonic which would brace him up to the effort of facing Mrs. Elliott.

‘I don’t see what good that would do,’ responded Audrey. ‘Let us go at once and tell aunt Eleanor, and get it over.’

‘What had I better say? Shall we leave

it till you get home, and I will come over and call?’

‘No; I won’t put it off. Suspense is worse than anything.’

‘Suspense? What do you mean?’

‘Suppose she won’t consent?’

‘Do you mean that you will let that influence you?’

‘No, oh no! Only what am I to do?’

Digby groaned—a sure sign he was perplexed—and put his arm round her as if to lead her away.

‘Where is she?’

‘Audrey, are you ready? The carriage is just coming to the door!’ said a voice, the very concentration of anger and balked will.

It was only eleven, and the carriage was not ordered till twelve; but one of Mrs. Elliott’s favourite modes of domestic torture was to keep up an incessant agitation about its being time to start an hour, or two hours sometimes, before the real moment for departure had arrived.

Digby still had his arm round Audrey, a

fact of which Mrs. Elliott became instantaneously aware, but which she chose to ignore, reserving it as the justification for future stabs to be inflicted, as occasion offered, on her niece.

Despair gave Digby courage. He drew Audrey forward, taking her hand in his, and began some blundering announcement. Mrs. Elliott listened, and looked—cold, contemptuous, disdainful.

Habit makes greater cowards of us than conscience does. We defy or stifle conscience, but habit is a tyrant that defies defiance and refuses to be stifled; and when habit is backed up by affection, then it becomes stronger than life. It was habit that enslaved Digby and Audrey to Mrs. Elliott, and made them wince now under the hard cruel contempt with which she listened to the young man's blundering story.

She could not legally prevent the marriage; but how little that had to do with the difficulties of the case! The really difficult points of life lie outside the domain of law altogether.

‘Audrey is of age. She is of course at liberty to marry any beggar or fool she pleases.’ That was her contemptuous comment. Then Audrey, flushing deeply, spoke for the first time. ‘*I am* of age, aunt Eleanor; and I am going to marry Digby, who is neither a fool nor a beggar; but if he were both I should be prouder of being his wife than—’ Here she broke down, so far as words went, but she turned on him a look of trusting confidence which needed no words for its interpretation.

‘There is no fear of the race of fools dying out—that is one thing.’ Such was Mrs. Elliott’s benediction. And she went away, as if the whole thing had no further interest for her. When she was gone, indignant tears crowded into Audrey’s eyes. ‘It is too shameful!’ she exclaimed.

Digby did not speak, but he kissed her, and they went out through the window opening on to the sloping lawn. A little way off was the ash-tree under which Violet had been sitting that first day when Audrey had come to call at Oaklands. The blue sky was gleam-

ing through the tremulous eaves, birds were singing all about, insects were humming. A squirrel ran suddenly across the grass, looked at the two, and then leaped into the tree like a gleam of golden light. They went into a shady wood that skirted the lawn; it was sacred to pheasants and they ought not to have gone, but they had forgotten both pheasants and partridges at that moment—had forgotten all save that they were together. Digby kissed her again, with a groan that expressed much sorrow and sympathy, though in an uncouth way. But she understood it.

Anger had deprived Mrs. Elliott of her usual calm prudence, or she would have seen that nothing was to be gained by the line she was adopting. Audrey might have been moved by kindness. It was easy to disregard this heartless and unfeeling treatment.

CHAPTER IX.

ARE there times when people become suddenly possessed? When love and gentleness and human kindness and thoughtfulness forsake them? When, for a season, they become the sport of some evil spirit who mocks them, and evil entreats them, leaving them at last, but leaving them half-dead? It would almost seem so; it is hard otherwise to account for the tragedies which people who are neither brutes nor fools, but kindly human souls with kindly human feelings, bring about in their own lives.

Mrs. Elliott was for the next three months almost more than patience itself could bear. Audrey never looked back on the events connected with her engagement without a sense of bitterness. The season which should have been one of joy and happiness was, through

that lady's unreasonable temper and opposition, made one of misery. The engagement led to a compromise about the Irish visit. That was one good result of it, in Laura's eyes and Mrs. Ellis's at least.

Audrey looked and was so wretched in consequence of Mrs. Elliott's persecutions, that Digby and every one felt an immediate marriage to be the only way out of the difficulty. Storms would rage round that event, no matter when it took place, and the sooner they were faced the better.

From such a wedding Claude and Violet could not be absent, so their stay in Ireland could not be prolonged. Claude had been very hard and obstinate on the subject of this visit. He would not see Violet's instinctive dread of it. She said little to him on the matter herself, but when alone with her mother she would cry in a bitter despairing way which rent the latter's heart.

Laura's exhortations had, however, produced some effect on him, and now his sister's marriage gave him an excuse for descending

from his lofty standpoint more easily than he could otherwise have done. Laura had dwelt on the fact that Violet was much wounded at his persistence in insisting on that which she so strongly disliked. This touched him. It was an appeal to himself, which influenced him as no considerations of right or justice would have done.

After the reconciliation brought about by Laura's influence in London, the husband and wife had got on well till the Irish visit opened up a fresh source of discord.

Violet did not in this instance absolutely refuse to go, as she would have done a year before. Several things had combined to soften her feelings towards Claude. He had found that nothing was to be gained by driving her, so he had lately tried what leading would do; and whenever she by chance showed herself conciliatory towards him he responded so warmly and was so gratified that she could not but be pleased in her turn. She was even beginning to doubt if it were true that he 'did not care for her;' and one day she so far

honoured him as to impart to him her difficulties and doubts on the subject of 'being born good,' the only life-problem the solution of which ever troubled her.

'I do wonder and wonder, Claude, why some people are born good, like Laura Erle for example, and some bad, like me.' And then with a gay smile, under which, however, there lurked some genuine anxiety, she went on to speculate as to whether the 'little one' would be among the good or the bad. Claude could not feel that his wife was bad then, though her goodness was not of the conventional type he would have preferred, and he defended her to herself with some tender expressions which Violet treasured up, while apparently not heeding them much.

Then Colonel Wilmot's defection had undoubtedly brought her nearer to Claude; but the fact that she was thus softened towards him made her feel all the more acutely his persistence about the Irish visit. She would not refuse to go; if he went she would accompany him; but she took grievously to heart

his refusal to defer his going till the following year. That was all she asked. She was not strong at the time, and hated the journey. 'If he liked me, he would do such a little thing to please me,' she said again and again to Laura and to her mother.

Claude had his own sentiments about the matter. His Irish relations were the only members of his family who had not more or less openly expressed their disapproval of his marriage. They had not, as Violet would have said, considered it from the 'highly moral point of view,' but were simply charmed by the grace and beauty of his bride. To them she was all perfection. Claude's uncle, Mr. Esdaile, had especially lost his kind old heart to her, and was always entreating the pair to go and stay with him. He was 'getting on in years,' he said, and would like to see his nephew's 'lovely little wife and her baby again.'

Claude felt hurt that Violet did not respond more warmly to all this kindness. She was wrapped up in her own family, and did not care for his, he thought; and being given

to brooding over his rights, he would tell himself that she was his property now, and should study him and his, and not cling so much to her own. Violet did cling to her own. She had never loved her mother so much as since her marriage.

Claude, having promised Mr. Esdaile to spend a couple of months with him in the autumn, did not know how he could disappoint him merely because Violet took a sudden 'whim not to go.'

One day he went suddenly into Mrs. Ellis's morning-room and found Violet crying. The latter had always charged her mother not to tell Claude that she ever shed a tear on account of anything he said or did.

'I wouldn't have him think he could make me cry,' she said proudly.

Mrs. Ellis had six daughters, most of them grown women, with views and wishes of their own, and feelings and idiosyncrasies and energies, though the vilest system that has ever been invented for the torture of womanhood condemned them to idle, useless, objectless,

miserable lives, albeit they drove out every day in a carriage, and were waited on by very tall footmen and finely dressed ladies'-maids.

The daughters were all wilful, all miserable, all given to objurgating the mother who had brought them into a world where they were apparently not wanted, and where they had only suffering and utter weariness of life for a heritage. Between them she had often enough but a bad time of it, and she was seldom presumptuous enough to differ from them or to venture on a line of action forbidden or disapproved of by them. But now for once she would be disobedient and act independently, even though Violet might scold her afterwards. She had been thinking only yesterday that if Claude really knew how much Violet dreaded the journey, he would give up the Irish visit. His coming into the room when she was in tears seemed an interposition of Providence. 'Mrs. Ellis was given to believing that Providence interested itself much in her behalf. She felt her need of its intervention and interest, poor

soul! So when Claude, seeing his wife's signs of emotion, and much surprised thereat, asked what was the matter, she thanked Providence gratefully, and made answer,

‘Dear Claude, she does dislike the idea of going to Ireland so.’

‘Mamma!’ exclaimed Violet, turning quickly round from the window to which she had gone on Claude's entrance, every trace of a tear gone.

‘Now, Vi, do let me tell Claude. I'm sure if he knew—’

‘What?’ said Claude mystified.

‘She has such a dread of this visit,’ persisted Mrs. Ellis.

He uttered an exclamation something between an oath and an impatient complaint, and Violet said angrily,

‘There, you see! I will never trust you again, mother! I must know Claude best. He never does anything I wish. Is it likely he would sacrifice any fancy of his own to please me when he persisted in giving my child a name I hated?’

‘But, Vi dear, you don't tell him how

much you dislike the things,' pleaded the mother gently.

'No, she doesn't,' cried Claude, eagerly availing himself of any plea in his own defence. 'She never tells me or confides in me, and then blames me for disregarding her wishes.'

'I never say a thing twice,' said Violet proudly.

'No; you always treat me as if I were a brute who took pleasure in tormenting you,' he returned bitterly.

'Ah, don't, my dears, my dears!' pleaded Mrs. Ellis, all her heart in her eyes.

'I am going to Ireland with him; he needn't be uneasy,' said Violet coldly.

Claude looked at her for a minute, and then said, 'Violet, why can't we get on happily together?' and Mrs. Ellis exclaimed, 'Ah, Vi, my dearest one, it breaks my heart to see you and Claude miserable.'

Then Claude went up to Violet, where she stood by the window, and put his arm round her—rather against her will—and there was

an explanation, not so much in words as in thought and feeling, and a compromise.

They would have to be at Enleigh for Audrey's wedding; so they would go to Esdaile for a fortnight only, just to see Mr. Esdaile, and would promise to pay a longer visit next year.

'Will that do, Violet? Tell me openly. How am I to know if you don't?'

'It must do. You can't disappoint old Esdaile, I suppose; only I hate it so!' with a shudder.

'I will try to make it as little disagreeable to you as I can,' Claude said in a regretful way, as if lamenting his inability to please her.

His tone touched her.

'Poor Claude!' she exclaimed. 'I believe I'm a bad girl to you often.'

Involuntary tears gathered in her pretty eyes. She was ashamed of them, and drawing herself away from his arm, turned to the window that she might drive them back unseen.

Her tears distressed Claude—perhaps because he so seldom saw them; he had only seen her cry once before, and that was on the occasion of her brother's serious illness. Her tears did not flow now, but seemed to be wrung slowly from the depth of some vague feeling of suffering which she did not fully understand.

‘Has she often cried before about this?’ he asked Mrs. Ellis.

‘Yes, often,’ she began; but Violet interrupted her.

‘Mamma, you are not to talk about me. It is all settled now, so there is no need to say anything more about it. I was a fool to cry.’

Claude went to her side, and putting his arm round her again, said, ‘Violet, why do you exclude me from everything, as if I could not feel for you? I don't like to see you cry, dear. I didn't know it was a crying matter.’

God alone can know what vague dumb yearnings fill two human hearts, loving each other in a way, yet not understanding each other, and kept apart by pride, perhaps, or the want of facility in explaining themselves

and their difficulties. Some people say so easily what they mean and feel; it may be because there is little to say; while others!—each revelation comes with a mighty effort, leaving them weak and exhausted after it. Violet did not easily speak about herself to any one; to Claude she could not speak at all, and he felt that. Will the misunderstandings and wrong judgments of this life be cleared up in the next? Who can tell? Perhaps there we shall understand each other without the need of words to convey our meaning.

‘Shall we go for a walk?’ Claude said to Violet; and they did so, going on side by side, neither speaking, but both thinking. Violet’s life passed before her, and there were many things of which she would like to have told Claude, but she was proud and reticent to him, and words would not come. She would like to have spoken to him about that poetic dream of her girlhood, and of the many resolutions which, notwithstanding that dream, she had made to be a good wife to him; and then, when that old influence had come back into

her life, insinuating itself between him and her, how bitter and reckless it had often made her, and yet how regretfully conscious that she had broken her resolutions. All this she would like to have told him and much more—how, in spite of their many jars and quarrels, her love for him had grown and deepened—if only she could have been certain that she was really first in his thoughts.

But she could not tell him all, because she must have put her thoughts and feelings into words, and words convey too much or too little, language being still the poorest and coarsest of all mediums of expression. Violet's life was a problem to herself, a problem she could not solve. How many lives are unsolved problems to the livers!

She asked herself how it was that, as she loved Claude, she had so often plagued and tormented him, and how it happened that he so often plagued and tormented her. Of all insoluble problems surely that is the greatest. People who live only for each other, who would willingly die for each other,

torment and torture one another till the life of each is made a misery.

How much did Claude know of all that was in Violet's mind? One thought from her heart did go straight to his. He had never really distrusted her for one moment, in spite of all the discord Colonel Wilmot had caused between them. On that point he understood more than she gave him credit for understanding; but he did not understand how she was wounded because he had never told her about his love for Laura. He had congratulated himself on having successfully parried her questions on the subject, and had no idea how his reticence rankled in her mind.

They walked on between the lines of ripening corn waving to and fro, while the air blew softly, and a lark poured a flood of music from above. The sky was blue, but white patches of cloud hung about here and there. Claude knocked the head off a thistle every now and then when they came to a stile, thinking he was doing something useful,

and so they went on over the hill, till they saw the boy coming with the second - post letters across the Long Meadow.

‘Shall we go and meet him?’ asked Claude.

They got their letters from him, and stopped by the stile to read them.

‘Sit down, dear,’ said Claude. ‘You will be tired.’

When he had read his, she put an unopened one into his hand.

‘You may open that, and see what he says.’

He saw it was in Colonel Wilmot’s handwriting.

‘Why, Violet? I don’t want anything of that sort,’ he exclaimed hastily, giving it back to her.

‘I should like you to read it,’ she returned. He looked puzzled and hesitated, so she took it from him with one of her gay smiles. ‘Then I will do it; sit down here;’ and she made room for him beside her, opening the letter and beginning to read it

aloud, but holding it so that he could see it if he chose. He put his hand over it.

‘Violet, I never want that. Why should you think I did?’

‘I don’t think it; but I like you to see it.’

He put his hand on her shoulder, and they read the letter together. It was one of Colonel Wilmot’s characteristic epistles, full of gossip and the floating scandal he could pick up during the dead season. Claude had seen many such before, and could not but wonder why Violet should especially wish him to see this one. He did not know of all that vague yearning at her heart, of all her struggling gleams of good, or of all that she wished to tell him and could not.

‘Why did you want me to see it, dear?’ he asked at length.

It would have been better not to have put the question.

‘Because I did,’ she answered impatiently, and feeling somehow disappointed and chilled.

At any other time Claude might have smiled with some secret contempt or amuse-

ment at the lucidity of her answer. Now he did not. He kissed her, and the caress counteracted the chilling effect of his question.

They sat some time longer, and then went home through the lime avenue, where the autumn bees were humming and the fantastic shadows were lying thick.

At the door they met Mrs. Ellis.

‘Claude and I have been for a walk, mamma,’ said Violet, kissing her.

‘My darling Vi!’ said the mother.

‘Kiss mamma, Claude,’ said Violet; and Claude, as he obeyed, could not but feel that his wife was certainly a lovable creature, in spite of all her faults.

People’s faults were generally uppermost in Claude’s mind. He could not help that. Some people notice faults more easily than they do merits, and yet they don’t mean to be ill-natured; but some of Violet’s loableness softened him now, making him for once think more of her good than of her bad qualities.

That evening, after he was dressed for

dinner, he went into her room. In the old Enleigh days he had always gone into his sister's at that same time and sat with her, watching the completion of her toilet, talking to her, and playing with his brother's children. Then, when she was dressed, Audrey had always pinned a flower into his coat and kissed him, and they had gone down together to the library.

When he married he used to go and sit with Violet in the same way; but she never thought of pinning a flower in his coat—that was not a habit among the Ellises—and Claude had somehow missed the graceful little attention; still, whenever they had been on decent terms with each other, he had gone into her room.

This evening there was to be a large dinner-party, in honour of which Violet was being dressed with more than usual taste and care. She looked very pretty, and Claude watched with amusement all her various operations as she stood before her dressing-

table while her maid fastened her bracelets on her pretty arms, she from time to time addressing a word to him over her shoulder. She was so graceful that it was a pleasure to him merely to sit and look at her.

When she was fully equipped, and the maid had gone away for a minute, she took a piece of myrtle which lay on the table and fastened it in his coat.

‘Is that in honour of Mrs. de Montmorency?’ he asked, smiling.

The De Montmorencys were coming from Farleigh Abbey to dine at Oaklands.

‘No,’ she answered, ‘it is not in honour of any one but yourself. Do you remember, you gave me a bit of myrtle the day you proposed to me?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘I have got it still.’ As she spoke she put into his hand a packet of letters. ‘Those are for you to read.’

‘I would rather not, dear.’

‘But I would rather, dear,’ she said with some of her old bright playfulness, in which

there was now some touch of tremulousness; 'you need not read them to-day or to-morrow, but some time — when I am dead, perhaps. They are all I ever had from him, Claude, even before we were married, and you will see—I want you to see—that I never had any real secrets from you. There was nothing that you need have been savage about; only somehow we didn't take such serious views of things in our family as you did.'

'Violet dear, I daresay you thought me harsh often enough; but can't you understand how one may seem harsh to a person one loves about anything that one thinks wrong?'

'To a person one loves? Did you love me, Claude?—really, enough to care?'

'Why, Violet!'

'I didn't think you did,' she said, with a wistful look. 'Well, I'm sorry I ever vexed you so much; but you must read these, and you will see that your poor little Vi wasn't so bad after all; and you will think of her sometimes—'

‘Violet! For God’s sake, what do you mean? You are not ill?’

‘No, and I mean nothing. We must all die some day, you know.’

‘And that day is a long way off in your case, dear; so take back your letters, and keep them or not as you please. I don’t want to see them; I never thought of wanting it.’ She looked at him fixedly for a second or two. ‘It is quite, quite true,’ he said with a smile, returning the look; and then he took her hand and kissed her, and they went down to dinner together. But Claude never said one word about Laura, and his wife was still unsatisfied. He, on the other hand, was well satisfied, both with her and with himself. She had acted very properly; had shown that she felt how faulty her conduct had often been; while he — he had accepted her excuses generously, refusing, of course, to take those letters. It would have been shabby and altogether unworthy of him to have done otherwise.

All this Claude thought over with great

gratification to himself. He might now consider that Violet had surrendered, and that he was master of the situation; and that is always so satisfactory and pleasant.

They were to start in a few days for Ireland, and just before they went Violet drove over to Sinedston to say good-bye to Laura, whom she had not seen since the latter left Oaklands after the ball.

‘Let us go into the garden,’ said Violet. ‘I hate being indoors so.’ They went out, and sat talking under the acacia-tree. ‘You have been such a good friend to me always, Laura,’ Violet said.

‘I’m afraid I may have vexed you sometimes,’ answered Laura after a pause; ‘but I never meant it, Violet,’ she added earnestly.

‘You have never vexed me in any way, Laura, never. I have never blamed you. I was sorry at one time that you did not marry Harold Carew; now I’m glad you did not.’

‘Why?’ asked Laura quickly, and with a sudden rush of colour.

‘Well, I won’t tell you now; some day you will know.’

The morning had been very hot, but there had come a change. The sky was darkening over, and the wind sighing and moaning through the sombre leaves as the branches swayed to and fro. Birds were flitting about low down, close to the ground.

‘There is going to be a storm,’ said Laura with a shiver, as a sudden gust went howling through the trees. The acacia shook in every one of its delicate leaves. ‘Let us go in, dear Violet; you will catch cold.’

‘No, I have felt so stifled indoors lately! The storm won’t be anything. Look! the sun is shining over there behind that cloud.’

An hour later Claude came to fetch her.

‘I am quite ready,’ she said, starting up; ‘let us go.’

‘I must just speak to Laura,’ he remonstrated. ‘We are only going for a fortnight; Violet has told you that, hasn’t she?’ he went on, turning to her, as if anxious for her approval.

‘Yes, she has told me.’

‘She will come back all the better for the change,’ he continued, looking at Violet and then at Laura. He would like both to have acquiesced with cordial readiness in all he said and did, but neither spoke, which was chilling, and there was an awkward pause, till Violet said again,

‘I am quite ready.’

Claude felt some rising anger, but turned away to see about the carriage without expressing it—in words at least. Violet kissed Laura affectionately and said good-bye, and they walked to the front door, where Mr. Erle and Claude were waiting for them. The latter helped his wife into the carriage, and, having shaken hands with Laura, was getting in himself, when Violet said,

‘Stop one minute, Claude; I just want to say a word to Laura.’

He muttered some impatient exclamation, but drew back, and Violet got out.

‘Good-bye once more, Laura,’ she whispered, putting her arms round her. ‘I shall

never see you again. Be kind to the little thing when you have the opportunity.'

Before Laura had time to think what she could mean she was in the carriage, and they had driven off. The last thing Laura and Mr. Erle saw was a sweet face with wistful blue eyes; Violet nodded in her pretty way, and kissed her hand to them with one of her accustomed smiles. She looked so like her usual self that, had it not been for the wistful expression in her eyes, Laura would have thought that whispered sentence the work of her own fancy. What had Violet meant? Laura felt vaguely uneasy; but she remembered that her friend had been depressed lately, and much given to melancholy forebodings. Perhaps, as Claude said, change of air and scene would do her good. Nevertheless, Laura wished that she had been about to stay at Oaklands with her mother instead of going to Ireland with Claude.

CHAPTER X.

THE preparations for Audrey's marriage were being hastened as much as it was possible to hasten them in the face of the numerous impediments placed by Mrs. Elliott in the way, and Mrs. Ellis was expecting Claude and Violet back from Ireland daily.

The latter, never a good correspondent, had written only once, but in that letter she had said that she was well, and that every one had been so glad to see her and so kind, that she was delighted she had come, and had herself proposed to Claude to spend another week or ten days at Esdaile. They would still be home in ample time for Audrey's wedding.

Claude enclosed a note to his mother-in-law, saying she need not be uneasy about Violet, who was well and enjoying herself much. It was entirely her own proposal staying on.

Claude was most anxious that Mrs. Ellis should understand this.

The letter came on Tuesday. On Wednesday night Oaklands was startled by a telegram from Mr. Dashwood to Mrs. Ellis.

‘Don’t be alarmed. V. not well,—would like you to come.’

‘I shall not see her alive, I know I shall not!’ was Mrs. Ellis’s exclamation.

Mr. Ellis, of course, pooh - poohed her fears, all the more so because he shared them himself. There was no train for several hours, but long before they could possibly have started there came another telegram, ‘Come at once.’ The first had not been received for several hours after it was due.

How Mrs. Ellis got through that journey, she never knew. The ceaseless splash of the water against the side of the steamer sounded in her ears for months after as a funeral dirge. There was no railway within twenty miles of Esdaile, but a carriage was awaiting them, and fresh horses were ready to do the second ten miles.

‘How is Mrs. Dashwood?’ Mr. Ellis asked the servant.

The man looked grave. ‘Very bad, sir.’

‘Good God! But what is it? We know nothing.’

‘Her throat, sir. There was no danger at first.’

They hurried into the carriage, and the horses started at full speed. They went as if they knew how much depended on their exertions, but the country was hilly, and their course was constantly interrupted by sudden dips and steep ascents. The sun was shining down in golden splendour over valleys and hills stretching far away on every side, and rejoicing as the Great Giver crowned them with His goodness. In that south-west country the harvest was late. A wagon, laden with yellow grain, came heavily along, the man cracking his whip as he walked by the horses; little children, some with aprons full of flowers, others with bundles of wheat, followed, singing or talking to each other. Below was the sea, as beauti-

fully blue as the sky above it; fishing vessels, with the sun gilding their white sails, were dotted thickly all about—not like painted ships ‘upon a painted ocean,’ but real and full of life, as the whole beautiful scene was. It impressed itself for ever on Mrs. Ellis’s memory; for she could recall it afterwards, though at the time she had had no eye for anything. Her whole being was one fear, one terrible anxiety. Life and Death are perpetually meeting and shaking hands over that narrow stream that lies between. The lodge gates were wide open, and shortly before the carriage dashed through, a baby had seen the light, while Violet lay breathing out her last up at the great house, as the western sun streamed in on her; she was unconscious of its glare, unconscious of Claude’s face of agony, unconscious of all that was going on around her.

‘We will walk up to the house,’ said Mrs Ellis. ‘The carriage wheels may disturb her.’

There was no need. She was gone where nothing here could disturb her more, gone

with that one aching longing in her heart still unsatisfied. Would it trouble her in that other world where she had already begun a new life in one of the many mansions? Who can tell? But it was well for her that her time of trial here was over. It was well with her, only that she left aching hearts behind—her mother, whose life she had been, her father, the many friends who had delighted in her beauty and brightness. And Claude? He was awed by the suddenness of his young wife's death; her dread of the visit to Ireland now seemed to have been prophetic, and he bitterly reproached himself for having so persistently urged it. Yet how could he have foreseen all that was to happen? He was too much shocked and awed even to dread the first interview with Mr. and Mrs. Ellis.

When the carriage stopped, and they got out to walk up to the house in order not to disturb her whom they could never disturb more, he was standing on the steps awaiting them. He went down to meet them, his face so white that no words were needed.

‘ I felt how it would be! She felt it herself! Why was Claude so cruel as to force my child here?’

That was Mrs. Ellis’s cry in the bitterness of her despair. But she only said it once. She could not say it again after she saw his face, and heard his pitiful pleading,

‘ I did my best, Mrs. Ellis.’

If she had only been in time to hear one tone of the sweet voice—to receive one glance from the wistful blue eyes! Those wistful eyes haunted the mother ever after. Her pretty little Violet had not been happy, so she thought in her misery. But the wistful look had only come lately into Violet’s eyes, and she would not herself have said that she had not been happy.

The story of her illness was soon told. The day she wrote to her mother she felt her throat sore; but as she had been out on the lake for several hours the fact was easily accounted for, and it was with difficulty that Claude persuaded her to see the family doctor. She was out and about everywhere the next

day as usual, but her throat was still sore, and in the afternoon she said to Claude suddenly,

‘Could mamma come here? I should like it. My throat is bad.’

He laughed at her nervousness, but sent off a telegram at once, feeling uneasy, he hardly knew why. He also wrote to Mrs. Ellis, but she had left Oaklands before the letter got there. The doctor said emphatically there was no danger, and resented Claude’s determination to summon a physician from Dublin. Mrs. Dashwood was suffering only from an ordinary sore throat, he said. But despite his assurances Violet grew rapidly worse, and when the Dublin doctor arrived she was past hope. Every means were tried ; Claude, in his despairing fright, sending telegram after telegram to Mrs. Ellis, to Dublin, and to London, summoning medical aid. But no aid could avail.

Probably no doctor could have saved her. Learned reasons were given for the suddenness with which she had succumbed to what seemed only an ordinary attack of diphtheria.

She had been delicate for some time; her system was low, et cætera, et cætera. It seemed a horrible mocking dream to Mrs. Ellis, as she listened.

All that was mortal of Violet was laid with generations of Dashwoods in Smedston Church, where for many a day Laura Erle kept a cross or a wreath of flowers always renewed, in memory of her friend. And 'the little thing' whom Violet had loved in her way—not very wisely, perhaps, but yet truly—would come and look, and point upwards, and tell how her 'pretty mamma was gone up to God in the sky.'

And so there was a blank where Violet had been; her place knew her no more. But wounds heal; blanks are filled up; summer succeeds winter; day succeeds night; and, while we are here, we have to live and move, and walk and sleep, though the light may be gone out of our lives.

There was one heart in which the blank was never filled up. Mrs. Ellis could not reconcile herself to the loss of her child. She

could not feel that it was well with Violet; that she was better off; she only felt that she missed her, that she wanted to see her, to speak to her, to hear her voice. Her grief was pitiable to see; and Claude had never in his life showed to more advantage than in his intercourse with her at this time. He was unwearied in his gentleness and his attention to her, bearing with the irritability of her sorrow, and controlling, where she was concerned, all that touchiness which made living with him a misery.

He let her keep the child at Oaklands, though it was a trial to him to part with the little creature; and he disliked the sort of training she would have there; but he seemed constantly to feel that he could not do enough for Mrs. Ellis.

Was this a tribute he paid to Violet's memory, because he felt that perhaps his own grief was not so absorbing as to occupy all his thoughts? Or was it that death had awed him for the time out of his selfishness? A little of both probably.

CHAPTER XI.

AFTER Laura had declined Harold Carew's offer, Audrey Dashwood had said to her, 'I pity poor Lady Emily! She will have a bad time of it for the next six months.'

But she was judging Harold by her experience of Claude, who, if he was unhappy or uncomfortable himself, contrived to make every one else equally so. Mr. Carew did not torment his mother by his temper, though he had felt very distinctly at first that she was the great obstacle between him and the only girl he had ever wished to have for his wife. He told her that he had asked Laura to marry him, and that she had refused, and Lady Emily had said, after a pause, 'Whatever grieves you must grieve me;' and then there had been a long silence.

Harold knew that his mother was sorry for his disappointment, but that in her heart

she did not regret its cause, and as Lady Emily knew that he knew this, there was some constraint between them at first. Yet, though she could not but rejoice at the cause of her son's disappointment, her maternal pride was wounded. During that long silence she was thinking, and at last she said, in a voice of gentle asperity, 'Laura Erle is a young lady difficult to please. I should be glad to know what she can want in a husband that she would not have found in you.'

To this Mr. Carew made no answer, for he believed then that not he himself was objectionable in Laura's eyes, but that Lady Emily herself stood between them. He altered his opinion, however, after that visit to Oaklands in the early autumn. Laura may have thought that Lady Emily's objections were influencing her; in reality it was that old wound which she was still feeling—the ghost of her dead love.

His own love had given Harold insight into, and respect for, the love of another. He felt how the ghost of a past love may vex and

haunt the place where the love itself has long ceased to dwell. His nature was tenacious; whatever affection once took possession of his heart fixed itself there for ever. He made no vows or professions, even to himself; but he knew instinctively that he would never be able to say of his love, 'It is past.' Laura's bright image, having once enshrined itself in his soul, would reign there to the very end; and judging her by himself, he thought he saw now the higher motive which had prompted her refusal. He did not blame her for the refusal; he revered and loved her the more for it, even while condemning her severely, and grieving sincerely because he thought she was yielding to temptation.

And thinking this the solution of the difficulty, he ceased to hold Lady Emily responsible for his disappointment, and never alluded to it or seemed to let it come between them; so she grew very hopeful again, and began to deliberate on the advisability of asking Miss Bingley to Melbury in October, when Harold would be down for the shooting.

Lady Emily always went to the sea in the autumn; and this year, after the Bingleys had left Oaklands, they joined her at Folkestone. Miss Bingley, who was naturally much with Lady Emily, told her of the gay doings at Oaklands, and all about the ball and the *tableaux*, and how Laura had pronounced her (Miss Bingley's) acting bad, and had taken the part herself. She told her also how much Laura had danced with Claude Dashwood, and how Mr. Carew had come to Oaklands, and been shocked at seeing Laura's open flirtation with a married man—her former admirer.

Miss Bingley had been quite struck and delighted by his remarks on the subject. He had spoken with so much sense and good feeling, that if anything had been needed to increase her respect and esteem for him, those remarks of his would certainly have supplied that thing. Nothing had been wanted, of course. It was impossible to feel greater respect and esteem for any one than Miss Bingley felt for Mr. Carew—quite impossible.

Miss Bingley did not think of mentioning

how Mr. Carew had stood by the door watching Miss Erle, or how he had gone off into the conservatory with her, and come back looking so angry and distressed, and had, soon afterwards, disappeared from the ballroom. None of these things had escaped Miss Bingley's keen observation, but she did not mention them; neither did she mention how repeatedly and severely he had snubbed her herself. He did it unconsciously, indeed, for he never meant to be rude, but very certainly, and had Miss Bingley had one grain of self-respect, she would never have spoken to Mr. Carew again; but when women belong to that school which has for its first law, 'Marriage is the principal thing, therefore get a husband, and with all thy getting get married,' they must not stand on ceremony.

It was all a revelation to Lady Emily, and a painful one. She was grieved to think that Laura should have done anything to make such an accusation possible. In her kind heart, she tried to find excuses for her; but she did not try to find any for Claude. She con-

demned him to herself, and to Miss Bingley too, in no measured terms.

It was not easy to find excuses for Laura's conduct, as that conduct was represented by Miss Bingley, though the latter was very 'charitable' in her remarks.

Has the reader ever met a very charitable person? A person who is charitable in the face of facts, under all conditions, and to all people? Who makes oleaginous excuses and presupposes extenuating circumstances for the most detestable crimes and vices? Such a person makes charity as unlovely as he makes any other virtue he undertakes to practise; he is not exercising true charity at all, in fact, but a base counterfeit, by which the real thing is brought into disrepute. Charity which is charitable at the expense of justice and truth is not a Christian grace, but something very different.

Miss Bingley was one of these would-be charitable people. She was always so 'charitable' in her judgments, so lenient in her remarks, so full of excuses under which lurked

cruel insinuations, that she might almost have been a professing Christian who boasts of having 'so learned Christ' while he defrauds the weak and oppresses the orphan.

She first blackened Laura to Lady Emily, and then made weak excuses for her. She 'would not condemn her; it was very natural; it was not for her to judge motives; et cætera, et cætera.' If she was sincere she cannot have had any real appreciation of the difference between right and wrong. If she was not sincere, her charity was only slander under a mask. Whichever it was, it jarred on Lady Emily, who said, at last, 'Dear Frances, the subject distresses me! I am so fond of Laura that I do not like even to think of her doing anything foolish. We won't talk about it any more, please;' and then Miss Bingley saw that she had gone far enough.

Harold usually joined his mother at the sea for a week or ten days before she left, but this year he did not do so, knowing that Miss Bingley was there, and not having courage to

face her. He made some excuse for not going to Folkestone, but consoled his mother by dwelling on the pleasure he should have in meeting her at Melbury when he went down for the shooting. She was disappointed. His visit had always been the crowning enjoyment of her stay by the sea. Could it be that he had not come because the Bingleys had taken the house next to hers? She asked herself this question in some dismay.

But she would have him during the shooting season. This was usually a joyful time to Lady Emily. Her son was a sportsman, not a slaughterer of birds; so preserving was not made a trade of, nor the fact that his neighbour was a better shot than he the foundation of a feud between the two families, and he looked forward to the shooting season with no less pleasure than did his mother. She was delighted to have him with her; and he was delighted to go out with his dogs, whose ways he loved to watch, and his keeper, whom he had known from his boyhood, through the stubbles, away down by the plant-

ations, where transparent blue mists hung late till the sun dispersed them, and up over the thymy downs, on which the air blew fresh and free. The walking was the best part of the day's amusement; he loved all the scenery for itself, and was happy whether he was alone or whether he had a friend with him. In the former case, Lady Emily used to take him out some luncheon in her pony carriage, and last autumn he had begun to dream some dreams as he went along in the pleasant morning air. Laura was a capital walker; and if some day he could have her to start with him, her dress looped up, her pretty feet just showing, her hat, with its gay plume, giving her that coquettish air which Mr. Carew could not help admiring with an admiration in which amusement had no small part, he felt that his walk would be even pleasanter than it was now. She could be silent on occasion—he had learned that—so he had no fear that her chatter would disturb the game, and he would not go too far or too fast for her; and then Lady Emily would come out with the

luncheon, which they would all three have together; after which the ladies would drive home, and he would go on his way rejoicing for the rest of the day; and, perhaps, Laura would come to meet him in the evening, or be standing waiting for him at the door on his return. He drew many a pretty little picture to himself in which Laura was always the central figure; but the picture was not destined to be realised, and Harold had to walk through the stubbles and over the thymy downs alone—this year, at all events. Yet he need not have gone alone.

Walking was not Miss Bingley's strong point, but she would have walked any number of miles with him—before marriage—if he would only have consented to put her, instead of Laura Erle, as a central figure in that picture.

Lady Emily gave him opportunity enough of doing so, and could not but feel aggrieved at his pertinacity in refusing to avail himself of his chances. In spite of her moral courage, she did feel some hesitation about telling him

that Miss Bingley was coming to stay at Melbury. She said nothing of it the night of his arrival, nor the next day till after dinner. Then she mentioned, casually, that Frances Bingley was coming to her for a little while.

Harold had been asleep, but had woke up when the coffee appeared, and was now sitting, his arms resting on his knees, holding his cup, and looking into it, as if it contained some wonderful secret.

After his shooting he generally fell asleep while reading the paper, which he would let drop gradually, and Lady Emily, when she saw it go down, would fall asleep too, though she never acknowledged that she did so, and to accuse her of it was to insult her deeply.

But on this night she did not sleep at all. Anxiety as to how her dear Harold would receive her communication kept her effectually awake, and when he sat up after his brief post-prandial slumber, and was balancing his coffee-cup between his hands, looking

so intently into it, she broke her intelligence to him.

He did not answer at first; but put down his cup, stood up, and walked to the fire. 'I am sorry she is coming, mother,' he said, at last.

'She will not trouble you much, dear Harold; you will only see her at breakfast, and in the—'

'I shall not see her at all, mother,' he returned gravely. 'I cannot stay here if she comes.'

'Not stay here, Harold? What do you mean?'

'I mean this, mother. I know what you wish, of course; but in this thing I cannot comply with your wishes, and as I cannot, I will not willingly meet Miss Bingley.'

Lady Emily was overwhelmed. She had not at all expected that he would resort to so extreme a measure. If the visit was inevitable, she believed that he would reconcile himself to it. It was impossible to believe that he should justify his sobriquet by leav-

ing Melbury because a young lady was coming to stay there. She remonstrated warmly. It was so unkind of him! It would look so odd! Why had he not told her that his peculiarities had increased to such an extent that he objected to meeting ladies at all? that rather than meet them he would lose his shooting? It was too cruelly unkind of him to leave her just as he had come.

‘I am sorry to seem unkind, mother,’ he answered; ‘but I cannot meet a lady day after day who is expecting me to have feelings towards her which I have not, and never can have.’

‘Expecting, Harold? You should not speak so.’

‘I apologise, mother, if I have said anything wrong; but how am I to express it?’ and he laughed a little. ‘Miss Bingley wants me to ask her to be my wife, and I—’

‘You have no right to assume anything of the kind, Harold,’ said Lady Emily, with gentle dignity.

‘Well, mother, I may assume that you

wish me to ask her to be my wife, may I not?’

‘I have made the discovery that my wishes do not influence you, Harold; therefore, it can signify little what they are.’

‘You are very unjust in this matter,’ he said, after a pause. ‘You would like my wife to be to me what you were to my father—at least, I imagine your affection for me would lead you to do so—’

‘I should, of course, Harold. I live only for your happiness;’ and her eyes filled with tears.

‘Then, mother, why will you not believe that not my happiness but my misery would be insured by the marriage you want to bring about? I could not ignore my wife, or be indifferent to her. I must feel that I can sympathise with her and she with me, and between me and Miss Bingley there is no sympathy whatever; therefore I will not meet her, and if you cannot put off her visit, I must go away.’

Lady Emily could not put it off. There

was not a shred of a pretext for doing so of which she could avail herself.

‘Then I will go away till the visit is over.’

Lady Emily did not often stoop to entreaty—with all her gentleness and softness she was proud and extremely dignified—but she did now entreat her son not to go away. If he would stay this time, and not lose his shooting, she would promise never to invite Frances Bingley to Melbury again. But she could not shake his resolution, which was grounded on a very real fear of the young lady in question. It was not brave to fly, but in such a serious thing as marriage, discretion is to be preferred to valour. He felt it to be quite within the bounds of probability that if he stayed now he should wake up some morning and find himself an engaged man. He shuddered at the prospect. Marriage was, in his eyes, the most serious step in life. ‘You may leave a profession if you don’t like it,’ he used to argue, ‘or change any pursuit you have taken up; you can get rid of a dog, or a

horse, or a house, or even a friend, if they don't suit you; but there is no getting rid of a wife; for even if you quarrel and separate, there is always the sense of responsibility.' But besides the very wholesome fear he entertained of an unsuitable marriage, he had a strong dislike to meeting Miss Bingley on account of the remarks she had made about Laura.

He blamed the latter severely enough himself, but he would never like any one who blamed her in his hearing. Miss Bingley had not blamed her openly, but her 'charitable' excuses and insinuations had almost driven Harold mad.

CHAPTER XII.

MISS BINGLEY was to arrive on the following day, and poor Lady Emily was more miserable than she had ever been before in her life when she saw her son drive off to the station, instead of starting with his dogs and his gun in the crisp morning air for a day among the stubbles.

He had not said one angry word to her, nor uttered one reproach, nor even implied a regret for his shooting, but that only made things all the worse. No reproach he could have launched would have made her feel anything like the agony of compunction she experienced when he took leave of her in that gentle way.

‘Good-bye, mother. Don’t fret yourself about it; it was a mistake, and can’t be helped. I will go and shoot with Fraser, and will come back when the coast is clear.’

When she was alone Lady Emily sat down and cried like a child.

‘And his shooting!’ she exclaimed to herself. ‘The one thing he looks forward to!’

At that moment she thought more of the fact that he was losing his shooting than of the defeat of all her own plans.

It was a terrible trial receiving and entertaining Miss Bingley. Lady Emily was, however, too well bred and entirely courteous to let anything of what she was feeling appear in her manner.

The visit was a trial to Miss Bingley too—a trial and a disappointment. She had naturally been sanguine as to its result, but now—*Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark must be a dispensation even to the most patient, and the poor girl had been waiting a long time for this too tiresome prince, who had just fled from her so ungallantly.

Her conduct was contemptible—husband hunting is contemptible, let its advocates say what they will—yet she was deserving of much pity, for she was only acting according

to her light. But what a miserable light it was and is!

Mr. Carew did not go to Fraser's for a week. He went up to London, and very dull he found it. Life was disappointing; hope, deluding; love, a detestable reality which, when it went wrong, deprived him of the power of settling down comfortably to anything, and destroyed his interest in his former occupations. It is doubtful if even Mr. Saffery's unconditional surrender on that disputed point of Hector's final resting-place would have consoled him now.

That excellent entomologist had called at Melbury the day before Harold left, and had disconcerted both him and his mother by his naïve inquiries for and about Laura Erle. It was evident from his manner that he was ready, the moment he saw her again, to renew his offer; but his presumption no longer aroused Mr. Carew's wrath. He only wondered at his fatuity.

The news of Violet Dashwood's death had come as a terrible shock to every one. To

Harold it was not only a shock, but a blow too. Till he heard of it he had not known how deep down hope will lurk and on how very little it will live. But now—Claude was free; there would be a decent interval, and then he would no longer be able even to think of Laura with honour to himself.

London was empty; that is, there were some thousands of thousands of living souls there, but they didn't count. All recognised London was disporting itself in the country, or by the sea, or abroad. The park looked dismal and deserted. The streets and squares struck him with a chill melancholy, like a room in which the friends one loves have been and are no longer. The houses where voices joyous or sad, as might be, used to greet him were silent, given up to the care of one poor lonely-looking housemaid. Harold felt inclined to commit suicide—an altogether inferior solution of his difficulties, quite unworthy of a Christian and a scholarly philosopher.

One day he went out, looking and feeling

dismal, and turned into the park. When London was in town he never put his foot there. He would have deemed himself disgraced by doing so, but now it was different; no one would be there, so that, at all events, there would be no witnesses to his disgrace.

He passed along where gay crowds used to congregate, but where there was not now even that 'single horseman,' and on into Kensington-gardens. So deserted did it all look that he felt quite a human gladness at seeing a lady and gentleman sitting together on a bench under a tree. As he drew near he recognised the lady with a start of surprise, which he condemned himself for feeling to be joyful; and by the vivid way in which she coloured up he knew that she recognised him.

It was Laura Erle, dressed very much as he always saw her when she formed the central figure in that picture he had been so fond of painting in his mind's eye.

In those days ladies did not wear hats in

London; but it was the dead season, and Laura had never been a slave to conventionality.

Mr. Carew was no longer dull and dismal. The tonic of his life had brought back all his energies. For the moment her faults were forgotten and all future possibilities; the fact that Claude was free was forgotten too. He thought only of the delight of seeing her. To every one there comes, at one time or another, some delicious interval during which the present is everything.

The figure beside Laura was that of her brother John. He had been ill, and was now taking the air under his sister's escort.

Harold went up to them, baring his head and looking very joyful. He was so pleased that he could not help showing it. Laura had not seen him since that night at Oaklands, when he had followed her so intently with his eyes, and then 'scolded her' so vigorously, notwithstanding her grown-up young-ladyhood and her long white dress all looped-up with blush roses. But though she

had not seen him she had thought of him more than she had ever done before, and grieved over the bad opinion he must have formed of her.

She did not think of him because he had 'scolded her,' but because, if he had not thought a good deal about her, he would not have troubled himself to scold her. And how can we help thinking about those who, we know, think of us?

She felt very much embarrassed, and quite lost all her readiness of speech; so that when he held out his hand, looking so radiant, she had not a word for him.

She had resolved at first, after he left her that night, that when she met him again she would explain his mistake to him; but as he had not taken the trouble to come near her afterwards, she grew angry, and had finally settled in her own mind that she did not care in the least what he thought of her; which was very satisfactory for Miss Laura, but did not prevent her from being much embarrassed on the present occasion, and leav-

ing him all the talking, except that part of it which John did.

That estimable young man did not know very precisely what had taken place between 'that rum chap, Harold Carew,' and his pretty sister, but he accepted it as a fact that all the men who had the privilege of knowing the latter formed a cohort, denominated by him the L. O.—Laura's Own—all thinking her perfect, all more or less devoted to her, all ready to marry her the moment it should please her to make a selection. If she would have selected Harold Carew, it would have been a source of great pleasure to Mr. John Erle. The hunting at Melbury was not first-rate, certainly, but there was 'very pretty shooting;' he thought he could get on with Harold, and Lady Emily was without doubt the kindest old lady he had ever met; he should never forget how she had once come bravely to his assistance; so now, while his sister's shy fit lasted, he talked away to Harold, and Harold talked to him, still standing before Laura and glancing at her from time to time.

John Erle had been very ill, and his sister was in town nursing him. He was only just able to get out, and was ordered to 'do a small constitutional every day,' he informed Harold, 'and found it all he knew to get through it.'

Then they reverted to the dulness of London, and John naturally asked Harold what brought him up at such a season.

To tell aught but the strict truth would have been heinous in Mr. Carew's eyes, yet how was he to confess that he had fled ignominiously from Miss Bingley? He muttered something about having been obliged to come up, and then turned to Laura abruptly,

'How is Claude Dashwood?'

It was the last question he ought to have asked, as he felt the moment he had spoken.

Laura coloured up and looked very uncomfortable as she answered that she did not know—quite well, she believed; she had not heard.

'How terribly sudden his wife's death

was!' went on Harold blunderingly, and still looking at her.

'Dreadful! Don't talk of it! I can't!' and tears rushed to her eyes.

Harold looked all compunction, and John plunged violently once more into the dulness of London, and the bore of being ill at such a time, while Laura sat looking away and striving for composure.

'She can't bear a word on that subject,' said John, in a low voice to Harold, as if excusing her emotion.

Presently they rose to go, John being under orders not to be out long, and Harold walked back with them to their home in Kensington.

'Do you come here every day?' he asked, as they got near the end of the broad walk.

Laura did not speak, but John said, 'Yes,' and went on talking vigorously.

At last they shook hands and parted, and when they got home Laura rushed up into her own room to cry bitterly. She thought her tears were all for Violet, her friend, who no longer

needed them, who was released from weariness and from Claude's exacting temper. What cause was there to grieve her? Our tears should flow for the living, not for the happy dead. And Laura's tears, though she did not know it, were more for the living than for Violet, who had gone where tears are wiped away. Harold went back alone through the gardens and the park, which were no longer dull or dismal, but bright with a light that came from his own heart. We only see what we feel; we make each of us the world we look upon. London had suddenly become a pleasant place to him, for it contained the thing which at that moment he happened to want more than any other possession on earth.

The next day he went to Kensington-gardens again, and met John and Laura; and the day after that he went too and met them, and the day after. Then came a wet day, and John could not walk, but Harold went there all the same, and, when he had got so far, he thought he might as well go and inquire for John at his own home.

John was lying on the sofa by the window.

‘Why, I’m dashed if that isn’t Carew!’ he exclaimed to Laura.

‘A gentleman has called, sir—Mr. Carew; he wishes to know if you would like to see him,’ said the servant.

‘By all means; I like to see everybody,’ returned John, who was a gregarious animal.

So Harold came in, and just as he did so Laura disappeared through the folding-doors into the depths of the back drawing-room, and so up-stairs.

‘Why, where’s Laura?’ said John, looking round after the first greetings were over. ‘Dashed if she hasn’t run away!’

This last was meant for an aside, but was perfectly audible to the visitor.

‘I hope I did not drive her away,’ he said anxiously.

‘Oh, she’ll come back, I daresay,’ responded Mr. Erle; ‘she knows I can’t bear being left.’

But she did not come back, and Harold

went away disappointed. The following day was wet, and he came again, with some books for John—and again she avoided him; and then Harold awoke from his dream. All that week he had been dreaming; he had forgotten that Claude was free, forgotten everything in the delight of seeing her and looking forward to seeing her. But at last the waking had come; he remembered that Claude was free, remembered that she had declined his own proffered love, and thought he saw the meaning she meant to convey to him now. She avoided him just as he avoided Miss Bingley, and for the same reason.

Forthwith London became again the vile dull place it had been before. The sun was gone down; the darkness had come.

He found it as insupportable as Miss Bingley found Melbury without its prince.

Bingley Hall was full of people—all shooting, hunting, dancing, flirting, singing, walking, and talking. Mrs. Bingley, who was stout and somnolent, found it hard work entertaining them. She wrote and told her daughter so,

and Miss Bingley told her hostess, who, always unselfish, would not keep her young guest from her mother at such a time.

‘It was dull too at Melbury, as dear Harold could not come.’

Miss Bingley protested. She had been very happy, and was so sorry to leave dear delightful Melbury. Which was quite true.

The two ladies understood each other perfectly. They had seconded each other to the best of the ability of each. That they had failed was owing not to any fault of theirs, but to the blindness and fatuity of that blundering, obstinate, ill-judging Harold.

They parted friends, and would always entertain a mutual kindly feeling, far more kindly, it is probable, than would have existed had they succeeded in attaining their object. They would in the latter case have seen so much of each other that one at least would have been convinced how little there was really in common between them.

When Miss Bingley went away, Lady Emily wrote imploring her son to return; which he

did, for he might as well be at Melbury as in London if he was not to see Laura.

The day before his departure he went to take leave of John, and to offer him a few words of wise counsel. When he was shown in, a visitor was already there with whom Laura was speaking; she could not therefore run away to avoid him. He sat down by John and talked to him till the visitor took leave; then he turned to Laura at once, being afraid that she would escape before he could speak to her. They had not said much to each other when they had met in Kensington Gardens, Laura having been shy before him, and all her old spirits seeming to have forsaken her, but to-day she looked brighter, and when he turned to her she responded with something of her old sparkle. It must be admitted that Miss Erle was a very inconsistent young woman. She had regularly gone away when Mr. Carew came to call; she had hardly spoken to him when they met in Kensington-gardens; but when he did not come to call or to walk with them she had made herself most

miserable. Her good brother John had no suspicion of how anxiously she used to look out for a dark keen face while she was listening to him apparently with the greatest interest. Harold's face and shoulders always seemed to come into view first. He did not really stoop at all, nevertheless his shoulders put themselves *en évidence* somehow, as clever men's shoulders have a way of doing, though why cleverness should express itself through the shoulders it is not for the unlearned in such matters to say. Harold was a slightly-made man, but his shoulders had a look of solidity about them which made them impressive; and during those few days when Laura had seen them her heart had given a bound which used to send the blood surging into her face. Then when it rained, and they had not gone out, but he had come to call, his ring had produced precisely that same uncomfortable effect on her, and though she had run away from him she had watched for his ring all the same, and when it did not come a horrible feeling of disappointment

took possession of her soul. She did not actually wish to die, having much to get through in this lower world yet, but she had to confess, Mariana-like, that she was 'awearied,' and that everything seemed a mistake and every one stupid, Harold more so than all others; for Miss Erle belonged to that class of votaries whose worship is never so largely tinged with reverence as to keep them from objurgating their idols if they displease them.

To ordinary ears Mr. Carew rang the bell much as any other gentleman might have rung it, but Miss Laura had learned to distinguish his ring from among a hundred, and on this day when it struck her ear her heart gave such a bound, and the blood such a leap into her face, that the visitor to whom she was speaking must have been less than woman had she not divined something when the door opened and a gentleman, with 'bachelor in want of a wife' plainly written in his face, came in. Laura was pleased to see him, so pleased that she could not help showing it a little, which puzzled poor Harold dreadfully.

He had thought she had meant him not to come—that she might perhaps resent his coming to-day—and yet now she looked quite radiant, smiled at him in her pretty way with that burning colour and those lovely eyes, and yet with a good deal of shyness too. He thought her beautiful when she was a little shy. Her genial welcome made him quite talkative, and he told her at last why he had left Melbury, looking her full in the face as he said,

‘Miss Bingley was coming to stay with my mother—that is why I am here now.’

John had gone in search of a paper, and as Harold spoke he lowered his voice, so that only Laura could hear. At that moment, and with that vivid blush still on her cheek, she could not be so untrue to herself as to tell him he was wrong; so she said nothing, only looked down, and felt she did not know how. Fortunately John came back, and Harold went on to say that his mother was quite alone now, therefore he was going back home again. Laura murmured something about Lady

Emily's being glad to have him, and then they talked of other things for a time, till Harold rose to go, which he did not do for more than an hour after he had made that communication to Laura. When he was standing and about to shake hands with her, he said,

'I took the liberty of giving my friend John some advice, Miss Erle, of which I think you would approve.'

'Now, Mr. Carew, don't tell Laura what you said!' exclaimed John. 'She is a good hand enough at lecturing me herself, without being backed up by you.'

'I am glad you gave him some good advice,' said Laura, smiling; 'he needs it.'

'I get no end of lectures on all sides,' complained the genial good-for-nothing. 'Every one seems to think he has a natural right to pitch into me.'

'But I did not pitch into you,' said Harold kindly. 'I did not even get so far as a lecture, did I?'

'Oh, it's all right,' acquiesced John good humouredly.

‘I asked leave, you know, before I ventured to speak,’ Harold went on, looking first at John and then at Laura.

She never could tell what it was that prompted her to say, with a quick glance at him out of her dark eyes, ‘You sometimes speak without asking leave, however,’ and then she blushed suddenly up to her fullest power of blushing.

‘I never venture to do that,’ he answered gravely, after a slight pause, ‘unless I am very sure the person I speak to will not misunderstand my motive. I would only do so to one whom I valued and esteemed highly.’

John rose to ring the bell, and while he was doing so Harold said to Laura, taking her hand as he spoke,

‘For example, if I ever had ventured to say anything to you, I should trust that you would forgive the liberty in consideration of the motive.’

He looked at her, as if expecting an answer, but she could only say, ‘Oh, certainly,’ in a low voice, and without looking up.

She had always meant to tell him that he had been entirely mistaken, but now no words would come, and a terrible fear that if he said any more she should not be able to restrain her tears made her manner cold and constrained. She felt that it was cold, and was sorry, but she could not help it. It would have been too ignominious to cry before him; and John, had he seen the least sign of a tear, would have exclaimed significantly, 'Oh, by George!' and have forthwith gone into the next room, leaving Harold to 'scold' her again, or ask for an explanation, or propose, or do some other dreadful thing. To save her dignity therefore she had to keep silence, and Harold went away under the impression that in her heart she felt resentment towards him for what he had said. Till that moment he had not thought that she might possibly consider he had taken a liberty.

As he walked home he tried to think what her manner implied. At one time she would hardly speak to him, at another she looked

radiant when he came near her. What had that sudden light which leaped into her face to-day when she saw him meant? And then he thought of Claude, who had always pronounced her a flirt, and of the ball at Oaklands.

As to Laura, up in her room, at her cousin's house in Kensington, she was quite miserable. Why had she not been brave enough to tell him that she quite understood his motive? Now he, no doubt, considered her an ungenerous and ungrateful person.

CHAPTER XIII.

LADY EMILY CAREW had recommended her young friend, Mr. John Erle, to bear in mind the admirable example set by Whittington, suggesting that it might be well if he would imitate it ; and John had gone so far as to picture to himself the pleasing appearance he would present as Lord Mayor of London ; but he had not got much beyond this in his efforts, though he made numerous and strong resolutions, and had really done well for a year or more. Then Nature reasserted herself, and he began to try severely the patience of his employers. For Lady Emily's sake, much forbearance had been shown towards him ; but he defied forbearance, always, however, with the best intentions. In truth, he was not fit for the work nor the work for him, and resolutions to resist temptation were made only to be broken.

He was not actually vicious, but the dissipations and distractions of a town life were more than he could withstand. It had been arranged that he should live with a cousin of his father's at Kensington, whose influence and authority, it was hoped, would help to keep him straight. That was a vain hope. His irregularity as to hours, his unpunctuality, his utter recklessness, were a ceaseless source of anxiety to her. She knew how much depended on his steadiness, yet found it impossible to keep him up to the mark.

It needed Titanic efforts to get him out in the morning in anything like decent time; and as the months went by no efforts availed. He was regularly late; and as punctuality was one of the things chiefly insisted on by the authorities, there was always a mark against his name.

'Worthless concretions of unmentalised matter' was the indignant description given by an angry patriarch of those young men of the day who 'loaf' through life, asserting their right to everything under the sun, while

they systematically neglect every duty laid on them by God, and shirk every responsibility entailed by their own actions.

John Erle had one æsthetic taste—a love of music ; but that, far from elevating him, became his bane, as in this world ‘noblest things find vilest using’ too often. The heavenly maid was for him a Circe who degraded his higher nature and dragged him down to the lowest depths of animalism.

Lady Emily’s friend wrote to her about him, being anxious to do all he could for one in whom she was interested. John’s example was ruinous, he said ; he was idle, careless, unpunctual, dissipated—in fact, not fit for the place. ‘It would pay us to pension him off, provided we could be sure of never seeing him again,’ ended Lady Emily’s correspondent despairingly. Deeply grieved, she wrote to John entreating him to amend ; she wrote also to Laura (this was before Harold had shown such unmistakable signs of wanting her for a wife) ; and to her friend imploring his forbearance yet a little while.

Mr. and Mrs. Erle went up to town to see their son, and try if haply personal remonstrance and exhortation would do any good.

John was penitent—he was always that—and promised much. For a time things went on better, but by degrees the complaints were renewed, and the anxieties of the unfortunate Erles began again. Happily for John, a fit of illness came on this occasion to his aid, and the illness was pleaded as the excuse for many of his past misdeeds; so one more chance would be given him; but it would be only one. The patience of the authorities was exhausted, and even Lady Emily could not plead for him any more.

Anxiety had brought on a recurrence of Mr. Erle's illness, and as his wife could not leave him, Laura went to town to nurse her brother, the cousin with whom he lived declining the task. John was again very repentant, but less full of promises than before. He now said he should never succeed at the bank, and was sure he ought to try some other 'line.'

There was also another thing. He was very much in love with a young lady, and most anxious to be married at once. Providentially the young lady had been endowed with sense enough to break off the engagement when she came to know more of her admirer's real character. Is it needful to say that he had not language strong enough to denounce her hard-heartedness, her mercenary conduct, her selfish disregard of his manship's welfare? Laura heard it all every day, and was bitterly reproached for her want of sympathy with his disappointment.

‘Well, I can’t help it, John. I still say she is quite right. Why, you can’t take care of yourself! Any girl would be a fool who would rush into marriage with you.’

John looked much offended. He was utterly incapable of resisting the very smallest temptation that came in his way, was always in debt, always a cause of anxiety to his friends, always in trouble; but of course he looked upon himself as strong and superior and masculine, and good enough to be the

husband of any woman under the sun, and thankful she ought to be to have him.

As he felt the vigorous life throbbing in his veins, while strength returned to him day by day, his plans grew in number and in wildness. They all had one aim—to give up the bank. If he could only do that all would be well. It was slow uphill work at the best of times, and did not suit him, ruined his valuable health, and—chief reason of all—he hated it.

‘Well, say you give it up,’ admitted Laura one day, ‘what will you do?’

‘I know a thing I should be A 1 at,’ responded John.

‘What is that? Pray tell me quickly.’

‘Reporting for a sporting paper.’ He gave forth the remark with the profound air of conviction of a man who has made a discovery in which he himself believes, and whose belief nothing can shake. Miss Erle went on with her work. ‘I’ve thought over it a great deal,’ continued her brother. ‘It would just suit my book, and I might get on

then to be a regular correspondent perhaps. I've settled on a name—they all have names, you know, Laura, that they sign themselves by—I'd sign myself 'THE ONE-ER. That would be a good name, eh, Laura?'

'It would show your modesty, certainly.'

'Oh, hang modesty! Confidence is the thing to win. Besides, you don't see; there is a sort of double meaning in it. The horses I named would always win—you would see their names in capital letters—I would send you the paper—and I should be such a one-er at the business myself that no one could come up to me. You see the point, don't you?'

'Perfectly. And which of the papers is to be favoured with your reports?'

'Well, I thought perhaps you could help me there.'

But Laura was unkind and unsisterly enough to refuse all help towards such an end. She would only advise her brother to keep steadily to the work which had been already found for him.

This was how things were when Mr.

Carew met John and Laura in Kensington Gardens; and the advice which he had given John, and of which he had spoken to Laura, was, that the former should abandon all thought of reporting for a sporting paper, and try to work on steadily in the bank.

But when he gave that wise counsel he knew it would not be followed. He had told his mother long since that John Erle in a banker's office was the square man in the round hole.

‘He ought to emigrate,’ he said. ‘He will never do any good in London.’

And Lady Emily had asked where the money was to come from.

Harold was now meditating another scheme. He had spoken to Laura once about John when he was town, and her anxious look and tone on the subject had touched him deeply.

‘He will never do any good in London, I’m afraid,’ she had admitted; ‘and the worst part of it is that his example is ruining Teddy.’

Could John act as agent to the Melbury property? The present agent was an old man, and even now wanted help. This was the question which Harold asked himself. But in order to answer it Lady Emily's assistance had to be obtained; and what would she say to a plan which would bring her son and the Erle family into closer connexion than ever?

John was to go down to Smedston for change of air as soon as he could travel, and was afterwards to go back to London for that last chance. Harold had but little hope of his success; so he resolved to prepare the way for the execution of his own scheme by leading his mother's mind in that direction.

Even if Laura's smile and blush meant nothing, if they had only been a passing caprice, and her allegiance was all given to Claude Dashwood, he would still not regret that he had done something to save her anxiety on her brother's account, for Harold was sure that John would do well living in the country. The work he would have would

be such as would suit him, the income larger than any he would be likely to command in any other way, and perhaps the mercenary young lady might finally relent and marry him. If the weight of matrimony did not keep him steady then, nothing ever would. Harold felt that strongly, but his opinion was that it would steady him, and for the sake of his generous bright-eyed sister he was willing to give him the chance, if only he could manage Lady Emily.

CHAPTER XIV.

VIOLET DASHWOOD's death had not caused Audrey's marriage to be put off for very long.

The moment she had felt herself to be in danger (and she knew that she was so long before the doctors knew it, or Claude would believe it), she had urged this point on her husband. The real generosity of her nature was shown by the remarks she made to him from time to time on the subject. One of the last things she said was, 'Give my love to Audrey, and don't let the marriage be put off. Tell Digby too, with my love, that he is to take Audrey away at once to Glynton, and not leave her at Enleigh to be plagued out of her life, just because I am gone.'

When it was all over, Claude remembered the injunctions, and gave the last tender messages and charges to those for whom they were meant. It was felt by all that Violet's me-

mory was best honoured by carrying out her wishes; so there was a very quiet ceremony one day in Smedston Church, when the crisp red leaves were lying all about, and the winds were beginning to make grand music among the hills. Only the redbreast was left to sing a song of gladness on the milder days, when the leaves, instead of being dashed and whirled hither and thither, fell slowly, one by one, as if dreading that long wintry rest before they could rise again, revived, to rejoice next year with the birds and the flowers, and with Violet's child, who stood now close behind Audrey, holding Laura's hand. They were both bridesmaids—the little child, who neither knew nor understood aught of what was going on, and the girl, who knew and understood so much and yet so little of the great mysteries of life and death, and hope and human love and suffering.

Charlie Dashwood had come home to give his sister into Digby's keeping; and Mr. Erle's voice trembled so as he read, that he could hardly get through the service.

The sun shone in on Audrey's and Digby's heads as they bent to sign the register; and when they went out a robin was singing on a sheltered bough, where some green leaves still lingered.

Charlie had brought his wife to Enleigh, and Claude had broken-up his establishment in London, and had once more made the home of his boyhood his head-quarters; so Mrs. Elliott was not alone though Audrey was gone, and she had no longer any one whom it was her exclusive province to love and torment.

Some women fuss over those they love, almost killing them by care and kindness; others torment the idols of their hearts by insisting that they shall be happy only in their way. It would be well if the idols could sometimes bear in mind that whether they are fussed over or tormented, love is the motive alike in both cases, and that if the love and the fuss and the torment were to be taken out of their lives, though they might gain quietness, they would miss something which is of more value.

‘God Almighty bless you, child,’ said Mrs. Elliott to Audrey when the latter was dressed, ready to leave her own home for ever that she might begin a new life with Digby ; ‘I think you are a fool to have thrown yourself away on Digby Forester; but God must take care of fools, or we should not have so many of them flourishing; so I hope He will take care of you.’

‘And Digby too, aunt Eleanor,’ pleaded Audrey, divided betwixt tears and smiles. She threw her arms round Mrs. Elliott’s neck, and in that long embrace much was said, though no words were spoken, and many things forgotten that no one would have been the better for remembering. Audrey felt nothing at that moment but that she was parting from one who had loved her from her earliest childhood with a mother’s love and devotion. And Mrs. Elliott—she knew that she was losing her exclusive right in the creature round whom all her hopes and wishes for this world centred. She loved her nephew Charlie devotedly and tormentingly; she loved Claude too, less devotedly, but very truly, and she dearly

loved his child; but all the passionate strength of her nature was given to Audrey.

‘There, child, go away!’ she exclaimed, pushing her from her with a tender roughness, while her eyes were brimming with rare tears. ‘Go to your new keeper; I daresay he is waiting for you.’

‘Say you hope God will bless him too, aunt Eleanor.’

‘I do hope it with all my heart, child. There; go to him. He won’t ill-use you—I will say that for him.’

And then Audrey went down-stairs, and amid many tears and benedictions and smiles, got into the carriage, Digby stumbling in after her with a groan—of relief, perhaps, that the ordeal was over. It is well people are not married often in their lives; once is found to be enough by most women. Men are more courageous, or find themselves less able to stand alone; or is it that they don’t dread a wedding-breakfast and a fuss as much as women do?

The very first stile that has to be got over

is enough to deter any one from entering into the thorny ways of matrimony. Digby vowed he would never assist at a wedding-breakfast again—not even at that of his dearest friend—having found his own such a bore. In truth, it was a dismal affair enough, though there were no speeches to depress one's nerves, or put one in a fever of pity for the unfortunate speakers.

The bride had charged her newly-acquired property to kiss Mrs. Elliott on taking leave of her. This weighed heavily on his mind, and when he attempted to comply with the order, he only succeeded in nearly knocking the lady's bonnet off. Being very tall, and she very short, he came down with a sort of swoop upon her, and then, on seeing the result of his awkwardness, apologised for it by a groan. His second attempt was no less abortive than the first, for he could only succeed in sweeping his moustache over his new relation's forehead. Then he looked helplessly to Audrey for assistance, and she made a diversion, and so at last they got off.

Enleigh missed them dreadfully. Mrs. Elliott walked about feeling miserable, and had she not had Adela Dashwood, Charlie's wife, into whose ear she could pour forth caustic remarks about Claude's folly in having taken poor Violet to Ireland, she would have had a fit of illness. Laura was also of great use at this time as a *souffre-douleur*. Mrs. Elliott was never weary of inveighing against Claude to her. She inveighed against Harold Carew too, till Laura was almost driven out of her senses; besides being completely at a loss as to the cause of her friend's increased animosity towards the latter gentleman. It is true the two usually had some sharp passages of arms together when they met, and the lady had always proclaimed her dislike of Lady Emily's son, but Laura had been accustomed to think that the dislike was more in words than in deed. People who profess to hate each other with genial frankness, and who invariably meet with a joyous anticipation of a fight, have generally some foundation of liking on which to ground their dislike. But latterly

there had come a bitterness into Mrs. Elliott's way of speaking of Harold, for which Laura was at loss to account.

In truth the sole head and front of his offending was that he had not succeeded in making Laura his own property, instead of leaving her there at Smedston to be a temptation to Claude, now that the latter was free again. Mrs. Elliott had eaten the bread of carefulness for many a day in order that she might effectually separate those two. She thought she had succeeded, when suddenly all her labour was proved to be useless. Everything had gone wrong with her. Providence and Harold Carew and Laura Erle and Claude and poor Violet herself had all conspired to defeat her schemes. Her darling Audrey had thrown herself away on Digby Forester. Claude had certainly given her just cause of complaint. With infinite labour and contrivance she had kept him from involving himself with the impecunious Erles by placing a barrier, effectual, as she believed, between him and them, but by his wilfulness he

had destroyed the barrier and was free again. Mrs. Elliott always thought, and very frequently spoke, as if Claude was solely and wholly answerable for his young wife's death. She had dearly loved Violet, whose gay bright nature had an especial charm for her, and Violet, though unable to get on well with Audrey, had been uniformly affectionate and winning to her husband's aunt; but now, in her annoyance and disappointment, the latter lady was inclined to blame Violet for her perversity in dying just at the most inconvenient time. Why, if she was bent on escaping from Claude's temper, had she not waited till Harold had persuaded that uncompromising Laura to become his wife? Then she might with propriety have died, and Mrs. Elliott would have mourned sincerely for her, without any of that sense of having been personally injured which she now experienced.

With Harold Carew Mrs. Elliott had absolutely no patience. What is the use of a man who can't even persuade the girl he loves to marry him, though she is penniless, and he

able and willing to make every possible settlement on her?

As to Laura—she was the most perverse young woman under the sun. Instead of thanking God that she had escaped Claude's temper, and taking Harold, whom she might rule—despotically, if she so willed—there she was still at Smedston, for Claude to go to for comfort and consolation, forsooth!

Mrs. Elliott could not understand Laura. How a girl like her, clear-sighted, brave, appreciating what was good and noble, could reject the love of such a man as Harold Carew, was incomprehensible to her. That she should reject it for the sake of Claude Dashwood was more incomprehensible still. As Harold's wife she would have all that the heart of a woman could desire—appreciation and love and trust, and as much freedom as any one who loves and has responsibilities can have in this life. It was in the nature of things that Harold should yield himself up to her sway entirely; her influence over him would be supreme. Since he had become one of those whom it

suiting Mrs. Elliott to make subservient to her own ends, she had studied his character closely, and the conclusion she had come to was, that he belonged to that class of men who will love, and seek the love of, a good and noble woman only, and who, having won it, will rest in it and on it to the very end, free from doubt or jealousy, or any shadow of turning.

The wives of such men are blessed; but unfortunately for women and the world such men are the rare exceptions. The great majority don't seek qualities which perhaps they would not value if they found them. In spite of the praises bestowed on the true metal, most people are content with pinchbeck, and it may readily be admitted that, as they cannot appreciate anything better, pinchbeck is quite good enough for them—better, very often, than they deserve. Only it may be doubted if pinchbeck is good for humanity at large.

Mrs. Elliott did not look on Laura as pinchbeck, but she was certainly a perverse

specimen of the real thing, and if she finally preferred Claude to Harold, it would be impossible not to suspect the presence of some alloy in her composition.

After Audrey's marriage Claude had gone abroad, and Mrs. Elliott's grand object now was to keep him there, or if not there, in London, or somewhere away from Enleigh; but Claude was by no means inclined to expatriate himself, even if the calls of his profession had not after a time necessitated his presence in England.

When the first shock of Violet's death was over, the thought grew into his mind that he was free, and, as it did so, hope sprang up again, strong and vigorous. He had made one great mistake in life, and had suffered for it. Looked at even in their best light, the years he had spent with Violet had not been happy. She had been too good for him in one way and not good enough in another, just as he was too good for her in some respects, and not nearly good enough in others. He had tried to do his duty, but it had been hard work,

as duty has a way of being when it is not the spontaneous result of love; but now God had given him a second chance—he was free once more. His appreciation of his freedom was shown by the strong wish he felt to surrender it again, but this time he would put it into wiser hands. He never for one moment thought of giving it up to any one but Laura. From the very first instant he had been calm enough to form plans for the future, she had entered into them; and he had soon begun to form plans—it was inevitable that he should do so. Not only did he love and admire her for herself more than he had ever done before, he had also his child to think of, and where could he find for her such a mother as Laura would be? There was the secret delight, too, of carrying her off from his rival.

‘I shall have her yet!’ was his triumphant reflection.

He knew that Harold had proposed to her, knew also that she had refused his offer, and a feeling, which was not altogether vanity, inclined him to believe that the refusal

had not been entirely due to wounded pride at Lady Emily's dislike of her son's choice. Nevertheless, though he told himself all this, he could not help being uneasy when he thought of Harold. He affected to despise the latter as one who neither understood women nor had ever had any influence over them; but his instinct told him that where Laura was concerned, this man was dangerous. He had not studied other women, or cared to acquire influence over them; but had he not studied her to some purpose? For all these reasons Claude was by no means disposed to stay away from England too long, thus leaving the field clear for his rival.

During his absence abroad he wrote twice to Laura. He had not ventured on such a measure without serious consideration; anything like disrespect to Violet's memory would, he knew, place an effectual barrier between them; he had, therefore, on both occasions, made some slight business transaction with her father the excuse for his letters.

But there are cases in which a woman's

instinct never deceives her. Circumspect as he was, Laura felt what his hopes and wishes were, and dreaded his return more than she had ever dreaded anything in her life.

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER his illness John Erle had gone back to London, and had for some months been so steady and punctual that his friends began to entertain hopes of his permanent reformation. The hopes were vain. By degrees he fell away again; old temptations and old companions resumed their sway, proving themselves stronger than any force of resistance he had in him to oppose to them. He went from bad to worse, and the evil day came at last. He received an intimation from his employers that after a certain date they could no longer retain him in their service.

Lady Emily's friend wrote to her expressing his regret; but the result had been inevitable; the young man's conduct could no longer be tolerated. John was as much surprised and stunned by the blow as though he

should not have expected it, and his total lack of moral courage showed itself on this occasion even more plainly than it had done on any other. He shrank from acquainting his family with his misfortune, as he considered it; with the just reward of his selfish folly, as other people would say; so left London suddenly, without informing any one of his destination.

The cousin with whom he lived was not alarmed at first, as he had on one or two previous occasions absented himself without giving her any notice, and had afterwards explained that he had gone to stay with a friend for a day or two.

When Lady Emily received that letter from her friend about him, she at once wrote to Mr. Erle and to Laura expressing her deep regret at his failure, and hoping they would not think he had been harshly dealt with. She assured them that her friend had been as forbearing as he could afford to be under the circumstances.

The same post brought a letter to Laura

from Harold begging her not to make herself unhappy, as he hoped to be able to assist her brother by finding him an occupation more suited to him than that which he was about to lose. He said, further, that he concluded John would go to Smedston when he left London; and as it would be necessary to see him, and consult him personally, before anything could be arranged, he himself proposed coming to Smedston in order to do so more conveniently. There was a postscript to the letter saying that, on second thoughts, the writer would come to Smedston directly, instead of waiting for John's return; he would thus see Laura and Mrs. Erle at once, and hear their opinion about the plans he had formed.

It was the first letter Laura had ever had from Harold, and she felt secretly ashamed of the exquisite pleasure it gave her. She could not but acknowledge that it neutralised the pain John's conduct caused her, and though she tried to believe this was because she was glad to have some comfort to offer her pa-

rents in their sorrow, the strange reluctance she experienced in letting them see the letter convinced her that joy had another source.

The letter did not contain a word that all the world might not have seen. It began 'Dear Miss Erle,' and ended 'yours very truly,' just as an ordinary letter from an ordinary writer might have done; nevertheless, it was sacred in her eyes, and she would rather no one had looked at it but herself.

Writing an answer to it was an event in her life.

'How had I better end it, mamma?' she asked, not looking at her mother, but making a pretence of searching for an envelope, and leaving Mrs. Erle to gather that 'it' related to the important document which was to be honoured by Mr. Carew's perusal on the following morning.

'How does he end his?' asked Mrs. Erle. 'I should put what he puts.'

'I think he has put "yours truly," or some such thing,' responded Miss Laura, who knew perfectly well what he had written, only

she chose to feign that she had not noticed. 'No; he has put "yours very truly,"' she added, glancing with assumed carelessness at his letter.

'Then I should put "very truly" too,' said Mrs. Erle.

'I think I'll put "truly," mamma,' Laura remarked, after a little pause; for, like some other people, Miss Erle was fond of asking advice, and then taking her own way.

'Very well, dear,' Mrs. Erle answered. 'It doesn't make much difference which you put.'

Laura felt that it made a vast difference; that 'very' in Harold's letter had flooded her day with sunshine; she would not have missed it for all the world, but she would not write 'very truly' to him, for fear the words might convey as much to him as they had conveyed to her.

She was just then so tremulous with happiness, every nerve was vibrating with such exquisite delight, that she dreaded lest her written words should reveal to him some of the intensity of joy she was feeling. She

could not venture to thank him warmly for his kindness; even ordinary words said too much or too little; and when Mrs. Erle read her letter she pronounced it cold and unappreciative.

‘Oh, mamma, it will do! I can’t write another,’ Laura exclaimed, with a sudden rush of colour; and her mother answered,

‘Very well, darling,’ and made no further objection.

The girl went out into the garden, which was ablaze with sunshine and flowers; the air was vocal with the songs of birds. It seemed as if the earth was sympathising with her joy. In a little time she would see him! Mr. Carew had lately been only a pronoun to Miss Erle. Even to herself she never thought of him as Harold Carew. He did not stand in need of any distinctive appellation; and if asked to which masculine name she gave the preference, she would probably have said ‘Tom or Dick;’ she would not, on any account, have mentioned Harold.

Great happiness, like great sorrow, de-

mands solitude. The light of common day is too much for it. In her joy, Laura walked away alone up to the Encampment, where she had once met Harold in those wintry days when the trees were bare, and the earth was hard, and the winds cold. Now the winds were soft, and the trees and hills and flowers were all instinct with life.

She sang snatches of songs in her rich contralto as she went along:

‘ Shepherd, what’s love ? I pray thee tell ;
Shepherd, what’s love ? I pray thee tell ;
It is that fountain and that well
Where pleasure and repentance dwell !
Repentance—repentance !’

What cynics even poets are sometimes !
What had she to do with repentance now ?
She had repented once, but that was because
she had built on a wrong foundation ; and
then other snatches of song floated forth on
the summer air :

‘ I love my love with a true love,
Because my love loves me.’

The words rose spontaneously to her lips,

and when she became conscious of their signification. she blushed deeply, though she was alone on the hill-side, with only the birds and the flowers, and the deer with their antlered horns, to be witnesses of the truth she had thus confessed. The deer glanced at her with timid boldness, and then sprang down among the bracken to where the stream dashed and foamed over the rocks, and Laura went up, and sat under the ash-tree on the Encampment—alone with her happiness.

It was a great deal of happiness to be called forth by an ordinary letter, signed ‘yours very truly,’ and Laura, who was no longer a child, should certainly have been more composed.

She did feel suddenly ashamed of herself for feeling so happy and delighted, and rose soberly to go home. There was John to be written to, and so much to be done; but her joy would well up again in spite of it all, for had not ‘he’ said he was coming to Enleigh to consult her?

She wrote kindly to John, expressing deep

regret for all that had happened, but bidding him not to despair.

‘If we are too hard on him it will make him reckless,’ she said to her mother.

Mrs. Erle was not likely to be too hard on him, but his father was very angry, and the cousin with whom he lived would not be sparing of her reproaches. Her forbearance was eagerly bespoken both by Laura and her mother. Their letters were the first intimation she had that John had lost his situation; and immediately on receiving them she wrote to say that he had not been home for several days; and explaining that she had not been uneasy, as he was in the habit of absenting himself occasionally. She caused inquiry to be made at the office, and there learned that he had not been heard of since the day on which he had been informed that his services would not be required after a certain date.

The consternation at the Rectory was extreme. Mr. and Mrs. Erle and Laura went to town at once, and it was not till a week of

agonising suspense and fruitless search and inquiry had passed that a letter came from John to the sister who had never failed him in all his troubles and misfortunes. It was forwarded to her from Smedston, and was to the effect that, having received notice of dismissal, he had not been able 'to face the fellows at the office again,' so had not gone back, but, by the advice of a friend, had accompanied the latter to the S—— races, hoping to find some sort of opening there as a reporter. Here came a long digression. It was all very well for Laura to ridicule the idea of his reporting, 'but a fellow must live;' he had always felt that that banking business was a mistake—he 'ought to have cut it long ago.' Resuming his narrative at this point, he proceeded to say that he had hoped to find something to do—'that something would turn up,' he phrased it, before 'the governor and mother heard about the bank, so that the blow might be softened to them,' as he supposed they would be in 'an awful way.'

Finally came the gist of the letter. Would

Laura send him some money? Till she did he could not get away, for he had not a farthing, and unfortunately nothing had as yet 'turned up.' There was a postscript: 'Make the best of it to mother, Laura, do.'

The letter came in the morning, and was read through by weary eyes, from which sleep had for many days been banished by cruel anxiety.

Well as they knew John, the father and mother and sister and friend could hardly believe the evidence of their senses. Had he no heart? No feeling for the torture he must have known they would undergo?

It is quite impossible to say how much or how little heart or feeling young men of his type have. Is it all pure selfishness, or are they only a combination of matter devoid alike of brain and heart and soul?

'He that begetteth a fool doeth it to his sorrow: and the father of a fool hath no joy.'

That was Mr. Erle's bitter comment as he laid down the letter. His anxiety had given place to fierce anger. His son's heartlessness

in causing his mother such long hours of agony incensed him more than the actual loss of his employment. He absolutely forbade Laura to send him any money, refusing to let him come to Smedston, or even to see him in London. 'Let him reap as he has sown,' he said, and no entreaty or remonstrance would move him.

The mother and sister were in despair.

'Promise me you will not send him anything,' Mr. Erle had repeated over and over again.

Laura would not promise, and she and her father had their first real difference, he resenting deeply her refusal to comply with his wishes, and uttering many bitter reproaches which cut her to the heart.

When Harold Carew came later in the day he found both Mrs. Erle and Laura in the greatest distress. The latter especially was in an agony of grief. She had never before done anything contrary to her father's wishes, and had only been driven to do so now by the urgency of the case. Harold had

gone to Smedston a day or two after he had written to Laura, and had there been met by the intelligence that John Erle had disappeared, and that his parents and sister had gone up to town. He followed them, and had been, ever since, unfailing in his exertions in their behalf.

When he came in on the day which had brought John's letter he saw at once that something new had occurred.

'What is it?' he asked; and Laura, with tears which all her efforts could not control, told him of the quarrel she had had with her father.

'Papa has written him a letter telling him he will never see him again or hold any communication with him, forbidding him to come here or to Smedston, and saying he is no better than a thief, because he has asked me for money,' she ended despairingly.

'Did you send him any money?' asked Harold.

'I did; but only just enough to bring him to London and pay his expenses at S——.

However, now that papa has written that letter he probably won't come, and we shall be in agonies of suspense again, not knowing what has become of him. Besides, if he is treated as a reprobate he will go to the bad altogether.'

'It is a pity almost that Mr. Erle's letter was posted; he would have thought better of it by to-morrow.'

'He took it out and posted it himself, in spite of mother's entreaties. The only thing now, she thinks, is for me to go to S——, see John, and induce him to come back—but how am I to do that without letting papa know?'

'Surely it would do if I went instead of you. I admit I might not be so influential with him as you would be, but I think I could induce him to come back. Will you trust me?'

'Trust you? Yes. But it is such a tax—'

'It gives me something to do; and I have only to beg that you won't say anything more about it,' taking up John's letter (Laura had given it to him to read) in order to look at the address. 'I shall be in time for the after-

noon train, so shall see him probably before he gets Mr. Erle's letter, and shall be able to make everything right. You see, I have great confidence in myself as an ambassador,' smiling. 'I don't exonerate John. He has been lamentably weak, and is much to blame in every way, but he was placed in a position for which he was totally unfit. Let us bear that fact in mind.'

'I do, I do,' she said eagerly, only too glad to hear him defended; 'but papa—'

'He will see things in a different light in a little while, believe me. Now will you let me give you a bit of advice?'

'Certainly. What is it?' with a faint smile.

'That you should go and lie down and try to sleep. You don't look as if you had closed your eyes for a month. I will send you a telegram after I have seen your brother, and if we can get back to-night I will call and report progress. If I do not call, you will know that I have been detained, and will not expect me till to-morrow.'

Mrs. Erle came into the room, and after some further consultation Harold rose.

‘I do beg of you to take my advice, and to persuade Mrs. Erle to do the same,’ he said as he was going.

But anxiety will not fly at any one’s bidding, and Laura and her mother were wakeful enough as the long hours crept by during which they could not hope for any tidings.

A consequence of Mr. Erle’s violent fit of anger was a threatening of one of his old attacks.

Mrs. Erle never left his room, and Laura sat alone, listening for every sound, late into the night. At last she heard a cab stop, and sprang out to open the door so as to prevent the ring, which would have disturbed her father.

She was in time, for Harold having seen her, and divined her intention, signed to the cabman not to touch the bell.

John was in the cab. Laura saw his pale face in the lamplight, but Harold alone came into the dining-room to speak to her. He had found John at the S—— station, whither

the latter had gone to see a friend off, and had, without difficulty, persuaded him to come back to town with him.

‘He will take up his quarters with me just at present,’ Harold continued, ‘till Mr. Erle has got over his very natural anger. And now you must not look so despairing. You will see him a steady-going respectable member of society yet,’ with a smile which had in it something of his mother’s charm.

Laura had no words to thank him even then; but it was not till long afterwards that she learned how deeply she was indebted to him and from what perils and what hands he had rescued her brother. The ‘friend’ under whose guidance the latter had placed himself was about as disreputable and dangerous a companion as a young man could well have. He had hoped to use John for his own purposes, one of these being to get him to marry his sister, a beringleted young lady whom Harold saw at the station, and whose presence caused him more uneasiness

and alarm than he would have experienced at the sight of a whole army of sharpers.

Mr. Erle steadfastly refused to see his son. Racing was in his eyes the abominable thing, utterly unpardonable, and he could not bring himself to forgive John for having mixed himself up with it or with racing people. Harold came early the next day, and had a long conversation with Laura and her mother. He had that morning heard from Lady Emily, who was most anxious that arrangements should be made at once in order to enable John to undertake his new work as assistant to the Melbury agent. The latter was incapacitated, not so much from age as from ill-health. Being an old friend of the family, the idea of superseding him was not to be entertained for a moment; but he stood in need of a coadjutor who would be able to ride about, note all that was going on, and see that his superior's orders were carried out. From all he had heard of John, Mr. Price thought that he would be exactly suited to such a post, and as Lady Emily warmly en-

tered into Harold's plans there was no difficulty. She was at Melbury, and would gladly receive John till a suitable residence could be found for him. He would see what his work was, Mr. Price would be able to judge what his capacities were, and if there was any likelihood of his succeeding.

‘And I think he will succeed,’ said Harold confidently. ‘The life will suit him; he will have some hunting and shooting, and being under the eye of people whose opinion he will value, he will be less likely to go wrong.’

Mrs. Erle and Laura felt again that they had no words which could adequately express their sense of Harold's kindness. It was a period of bitter trial and humiliation to both. Notwithstanding the scrupulous delicacy he showed, and the apparent sincerity with which he assured them that the arrangement was made as much in his own and his mother's interest as in theirs, neither Mrs. Erle nor Laura could divest herself of the feeling that he was acting solely with a view to John's

welfare and their relief, and that they were, in fact, receiving a very material favour. It seemed to both impossible that John's services could be an equivalent for the stipend he was to receive.

Mr. Erle set his face altogether against the scheme. To countenance it was, he said, to take an utterly unwarrantable advantage of the Carews' kindness. John would not do better at Melbury than elsewhere. To believe that he would was to ignore all past experience. He could not prevent Harold from offering the post to John, nor prevent John from accepting it; but his disapproval, angrily, even violently, expressed, added another to the many trials undergone by his wife and daughter at this time.

John Erle had certainly reason to think that Providence had taken him under its especial protection. It was undoubtedly a fact that Mr. Price, Lady Emily's agent, stood in need of an assistant; but as there were many more deserving young men than he, any one of whom would have fulfilled the duties not

only efficiently but far better than he would be likely to fulfil them, it was not to be wondered at if he considered that he was the object of particular favour when he saw himself thus preferred to others.

That he acknowledged that he was an object of favour was something to his credit. Many a one in his place would have attributed his good fortune solely to the sense the public or his friends entertained of his transcendent merits. John did not do this.

‘I know why it is done well enough, Laura,’ he remarked to his sister. ‘Precious little Carew would care about me if it weren’t for you.’

‘I don’t think you have any right to say so,’ Laura returned a little wearily. ‘He has always been most kind to you.’

That was true; nevertheless John adhered to his own opinion, nor was he the only one who felt that Mr. Carew’s interest in him was not due solely to the regard entertained by that gentleman for him individually. Lady Emily felt it too. In all the conversations

that had taken place between her and her son on the subject of John and his affairs Laura's name had not once been mentioned; but people don't always speak of that which is uppermost in their thoughts.

'I'm afraid you did not take the advice I gave you yesterday when I was going away,' Harold said to Laura the day after John's return, when all the plans had been fully discussed.

She smiled a little.

'I did not because I could not. One cannot command sleep.'

'No, one cannot,' he returned compassionately. Then taking an envelope out of his pocket, 'Do you remember our disappointment about the *Messiah* at Melbury? You have not forgotten that you promised to come with me to hear it whenever we could do so? There is to be a grand performance this afternoon, for which I have got tickets; but I would not say anything about it till your mind was at rest. Should you like to come?' he ended, in a tone of disappoint-

ment; for poor Laura, instead of looking suddenly delighted, as he had hoped she would, was so touched by his thoughtful kindness that she felt rather inclined to cry, and could only murmur something about 'thanks,' and look to her mother for help.

Harold quite misunderstood the look, and thought some foolish scruple about going alone with him was troubling her.

'I have taken three tickets,' he resumed, but by no means in the same tone of genial tenderness; 'so Mrs. Erle—'

'I could not leave Mr. Erle for so long, much as I should like to go,' interposed that lady; 'but that need not prevent Laura's going. It is indeed kind of you, Mr. Carew, and the change will divert her thoughts.'

When people have for each other some very deep feeling, the expression of which etiquette or shyness forbids, they are apt to magnify trifles—in common language, 'to make mountains out of molehills.' Harold magnified that momentary hesitation on Laura's part till he made himself quite miserable.

Why had she thought it necessary to look at her mother for permission? Her first glance should have been for him. Unconsciously he had expected to see that rapturous expression of delight which had beautified her face the first time he had spoken of taking her to hear the *Messiah*; but all that was long ago. Now Laura felt too much not to keep guard over herself; only Harold did not understand that, and was annoyed and disappointed and hurt—thinking she had been consulting the proprieties, and had hesitated as to whether she could go alone with him. Anything so commonplace disappointed him in her. It was ‘like Miss Bingley,’ he said to himself in momentary anger.

Poor Laura had had no such thought; but she was shy and tremulous with feeling, and looked naturally for support to the source from which she had always derived it. With the jealousy of love he thought she should have looked to him.

‘I will go and see if your brother will come,’ he said, rising.

Laura knew from his tone that he was annoyed, why she could not tell, and as a matter of course she tormented herself duly, while her lover walked away feeling very cross.

John had not ventured to come there after his father's prohibition; he was to see his mother that evening at a friend's house, and he and Laura had agreed to take a walk together in the afternoon, he meeting her in Kensington Gardens.

This plan of Harold's would prevent that, but John was equally ready to go to Exeter Hall. Nothing, in fact, could have suited him better; for, as Harold would be with them, there would be no opportunity for excuse on his part or reproach on Laura's respecting his late conduct.

Harold arranged that he should meet him and Laura at their old tryst in the Broad Walk.

'I will go and bring your sister, and we can go on together,' he said.

Laura was waiting for Harold, ready dressed. She was pale and looked very tired.

‘We will meet your brother and then get into a cab,’ he remarked; and they walked on in silence for some time. Suddenly he spoke, ‘I suppose you would not have come with me unless John had been able to come too?’

‘Yes, I should,’ she answered in quick surprise. ‘Why should I not?’ looking at him.

His face brightened. ‘I thought you seemed to hesitate.’

‘Did I? I did not know it. I should have gone with you in any case. It is so kind of you to have remembered my wish.’

Her answer was so frank and natural that he was angry with himself for having doubted her. He would have liked to tell her what it was that had annoyed him, but did not know exactly how to do it, so walked on in silence; and she, not understanding, was silent too till they came to where John was waiting for them by the bench.

The brother and sister had not met since the return of the latter. ‘Well, Laura,’ was his greeting. They shook hands and Harold

left them for a minute or two, saying he would go and call a cab. All three were embarrassed and uncomfortable: John, because he felt like a returned prodigal; Harold, because he was suffering from a vague sense of disappointment; Laura, because she could not understand the working of his mind. He had anticipated so much pleasure from taking her to hear this oratorio that it was inevitable that the reality should fall short of his dreams. He would like to have had her all to himself, in which case they could have gone in a hansom, and talked comfortably, whereas John's presence necessitated a noisy detestable vehicle, in which existence resolved itself into an aspiration to get out of it again.

Mr. Carew was, as a rule, charming and delightful in private life, but to-day he was certainly moody and unprepossessing, and made Laura, whom he wished to please, exceedingly unhappy.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON the Encampment at Enleigh, which was such a source of interest to Mr. Carew, there grew an ash-tree, which was a landmark to the whole country for miles round. It had weathered many a stormy blast, and had stood in sunshine and shower till time had hollowed out its gigantic trunk so that four or five people could stand within it and find shelter. All around straggled its roots, some moss-covered and soft, others rugged and knotted. In one of the crevices, a baby oak had taken refuge, having been cast there probably by some wind in sportive or angry mood. Two tiny leaves had first appeared, which it seemed as if a breath would wither, but guarded by the sheltering crevice, the seedling grew, increasing in strength and vigour day by day and year by year.

Laura always watched it with interest. What would be its end? Would it, cramped up amid the giant roots, pine and die ; or would it one day turn and rend the friendly ash that had sheltered its weak infancy? She paid it constant visits, and used often to clear away the dead leaves and twigs that lay near, keeping off the free air. The ash-tree was at all times a favourite resort of hers. There, in the shade cast by the waving branches, she could sit, and from her elevated position—the ash was on the top of the Encampment—look over all the beautiful country round. In summer there could not be a more lovely resting-place. Laura had often sat there with Claude ; it was there too that she had once met Harold, and there she had gone to tell to the hills and woods the story of her delight when he had said he was coming to Smedston to see her. There she went now, some time after her return from London, when John had gone down to Melbury with Harold, and his belongings at Smedston had settled

down to something of their normal quiet after all the excitement and anxiety.

Harold had told her that he would write and let her know how John and Mr. Price got on, and what the former thought of the latter.

The two had left town a day or two subsequent to that afternoon of mingled pain and pleasure on which Laura had gone with Harold to hear the *Messiah*. She had enjoyed the music ; that was a matter of course ; and for a time it made her forget Harold's moodiness, but when it was over and she could think again, she felt puzzled and distressed. 'Is he touchy, like Claude?' she asked herself, with a feeling of utter dismay.

But he had come the next day, having regained his usual serenity, and she somewhat recovered her spirits. He insisted on taking her for a walk, and then she was able to tell him better than she had done the preceding evening how delighted she had been with the performance, and how much it exceeded even her expectations. He looked pleased, and with a smile claimed her approval for not

having disturbed her by untimely criticisms. As has been said, he promised to write to her, and on this day, when she went out to her favourite ash-tree, she had received the letter. It was a hopeful one. Harold was sure John would do well now, and neither Laura nor Mrs. Erle need be anxious about him.

She showed the letter to her mother. The favourable report it contained was a matter of general family interest ; then she went out with it to be alone in her happiness.

As she sat under the ash-tree, through the rustling branches of which the sky was gleaming, unfathomable in its profound depths of blue, reading her precious letter again for the twentieth time, a shadow fell across the paper. Laura looked up, a tender smile of happiness still on her lips, and started when she saw Claude Dashwood. Instinctively she tried to conceal the letter she held in her hand.

Claude had been watching her from a distance before he came near, and his face reflected her smile as she looked up when the shadow fell.

He went forward with extended hand.

‘I’m afraid I frightened you, Laura. I did not know you were so nervous. You were absorbed in your letter, and did not hear me coming, I suppose.’

There was a confiding tenderness in his tone which alarmed her.

‘I can’t escape this time,’ was her reflection as she gave him her hand for a moment, and then withdrew it at once.

She had been doing her best to escape him for the last fortnight, but now the inevitable had come.

Claude had, of course, heard how John Erle had made shipwreck of his fortunes, and had been rescued by Harold. The news filled him with dismay. ‘Carew was not solicitous about John Erle for nothing.’ Of that Claude was very sure, but he would not yield Laura up to him without a struggle at least. He could not suppress a sensation of anger against Laura herself when he reflected that a struggle might be necessary, being unable to get over

the feeling that she was his and should have awaited his pleasure.

He had eagerly volunteered his services on hearing of John's disappearance, and when the Erles went to town had been assiduous in calling, but he had not succeeded in effecting anything.

Laura shrank with a dread altogether new to her from being indebted to him in any way. She even avoided seeing him when it was possible to do so. She knew the equivalent he wanted for his services, and that equivalent she could never give. He had himself killed her love, and no effort on his part could bring it back to life. In truth she had not loved the real Claude at all, but a beautiful idealisation of him which she had set up in her own heart; and when, as would sometimes happen, the real Claude showed himself through the ideal, she had felt a shiver of pain and doubt which even the golden light of love could not quite banish.

Then one day the real Claude stood forth,

deprived of the halo with which she had invested him, and she awoke from her dream—mercifully, before it was too late.

Alas for those who only wake when waking is of no avail! Is it better then to awake or to sleep on and dream? To awake, surely, even if only to pain. Disillusion is preferable to the blind worship of an ignoble idol; for the nature of the worshipped passes into the worshipper, lowering or elevating him to its own level.

Even if the waking come too late to save, it is surely well to awake.

To Laura the bitter waking had come in time; therefore she had tried to avoid Claude lately. But this was not easy. He would not be avoided. He seemed to claim her sympathy and kindness almost as of right, and as he was an old friend it was difficult to withhold them.

He went down to Enleigh with the Erles after John's departure for Melbury, and had contrived to see Laura every day on one pretext or another. He sat down beside her now

quite naturally, as if his claim to the place were indisputable.

‘I went to the Rectory, but heard you were out. Mrs. Erle tells me you have had good accounts from John,’ glancing involuntarily at the letter she still held half-concealed on her lap.

‘Yes; I do hope he will go on steadily this time,’ she answered.

‘Does he like Mr. Price? What does he say?’

‘Oh, the letter is not from him,’ she cried hastily, with a sudden rush of colour, and in a defensive tone, as if he had wished to deprive her of her precious treasure.

The moment the words had passed her lips she felt that she had made a mistake, and Claude’s look showed plainly that her eloquent blush had aroused all his fears.

He had not come out with any intention of asking her to be his wife just then, but he now became aware that if he did not put in his claim at once he might never be able to put it in at all. He felt sure that the letter

was from Harold; no communication from Lady Emily would have called forth that tell-tale colour. The conviction decided his action. With a sudden look of excitement in his eyes he took Laura's hand and asked her to be his wife.

Having been sure that he would do so at one time or another, she was glad to have the ordeal over; but much as she had dreaded it, the reality far exceeded her fears, for he put his case in such a way as to make her feel guilty of extreme selfishness in refusing his offer.

'One may speak with perfect openness to the dearest friend one has in the world, Laura,' he began.

She answered, 'Oh, certainly;' and he did speak with the most perfect openness, first assuring her that she was that 'dearest friend,' and entreating her to listen to him when she, feeling how useless was anything he could say, tried to stop him.

'I must tell you, Laura, how deep and abiding is the regard I have for you;' and then

he went on to speak of the events of the preceding three years, and of the help and value her friendship had been to him. All he said about Violet was marked with the greatest tenderness and good feeling. 'But to you, who knew so much of us, it would be useless to say that the marriage was a happy one,' he added. 'I made a great mistake, and, God knows, I suffered for it. That I did not suffer more is largely due to you. You were my good angel then, as you have always been. Can you wonder that I am anxious to feel that you will have the right to be so in future?'

With tears of deep sympathy she had to tell him that she could only give him friendship—nothing else.

'I value your friendship, Laura, but I want something more. You liked me well enough at one time to say you would be my wife; it was my own fault that we were separated; but now—we can still have years of happiness.'

'Only, Claude, everything is changed since then,' she urged gently.

‘I am not changed, I know that,’ he answered; ‘but I suppose I was wrong to judge your feelings by my own,’ bitterly.

She would not remind him at such a moment that his own actions had made change an imperative duty to her, even had the change not been an inevitable result of those actions in the case of a woman like her. He chose to ignore all this, if he thought of it at all, and went on to urge his suit passionately, implying that he had a natural claim on her in right of the love and esteem he felt for her, and the happiness she had it in her power to confer on him and his child. He did not once speak of her happiness—a fact which she did not notice then, but remembered afterwards.

In reply to his pleading, she could only urge her inability to meet his wishes, and express her deep regret thereat.

Both sat silent for some time, while the mist cleared away altogether from the valley, revealing the rich tints which were already heralding the autumn. Then Claude said with considerable bitterness,

‘I am too late, Laura; that I imagine to be the real explanation of the matter. You don’t label your affections “not transferable.”’

The colour flashed into her face.

‘Claude! you have no right—’ she began, but suddenly stopped herself, remembering how deeply she had regretted her hastiness once before. ‘I think you should not have said that,’ she went on quite gently; ‘you are forgetting. I am more sorry than I can say for all that has happened, but we must never speak on this subject again. It is only paining both of us uselessly.’

She rose to go away; he rose too, and accompanied her in silence down the steep incline and across the park, where the rabbits glanced at them shily and then scampered away into their holes among the bracken. When they got to the little gate leading to the Rectory, he asked,

‘Are you going home, or coming in to see Audrey?’

‘I am going home,’ she answered.

As he was opening the gate, which had a

patent fastening which would never unfasten, she said abruptly,

‘Claude, don’t let us quarrel. I so hate it. It makes me so unhappy. You called me your friend—let me be that still.’

She looked at him entreatingly, and as she did so, the gloom on his face softened a little.

‘Friendship is a bad substitute for what I wanted, Laura, but if it must be, it must, I suppose. I apologise for what I said just now. I had no right to say it; you must put it down to my bitter disappointment.’

He walked with her to the rectory door.

‘Will you shake hands, Claude?’ she said, as he was turning away.

He did so.

‘God bless you, Laura, now and always! You will come and see the child? I had thought what a mother you would be to her.’

‘Then we may be friends still?’

‘Certainly, no matter what happens.’

Which, with the prospect of her becoming Mrs. Carew before his eyes, was a wonderfu

concession on his part. At that moment he could, with much satisfaction to himself, have shot Lady Emily's son dead before his mother's face. Had it not been for that mother, Laura would long since have been Harold's wife, and he would have been saved the bitter disappointment he was now undergoing.

He went back to Enleigh and into his aunt's room.

'There, aunt Eleanor, you have got your wish! I have asked Laura to be my wife, and she has refused!'

Mrs. Elliott looked up from her letter-writing.

'Well, I'm sorry for your disappointment; but as you could not make John Erle your agent—that is, keep him in idleness—I think you have reason to congratulate yourself.'

'Is she engaged to Carew?'

'I have not heard so, but if she is not I should say she soon would be. You had better ask your sister,' as Audrey, who was staying with her husband at her old home, came into the room.

‘Is Laura engaged to Carew?’ he questioned, turning to her.

‘Not that I know of. She has not told me that she is.’

And, in spite of all that had passed, Claude hoped still.

CHAPTER XVII.

ONE day, about three months after Claude had spoken to Laura, tidings came to Smedston that Lady Emily Carew was dangerously ill—not expected to live.

‘Poor Carew is in an awful way,’ John wrote; ‘I just saw him this morning for a minute. He told me his mother had inquired for you.’

The letter was to his sister. The prospect of losing a member of their own family could scarcely have grieved the Erles more than did this sad intelligence.

Lady Emily had proved her title to the name of friend in a thousand delicate ways; and under her care and influence John had lately been making such steady progress on the road towards reformation, that there was some reason to hope that he would reach that desirable goal at last.

He was beginning to feel a chivalrous devotion for her which could not but have an elevating influence on him. Her gentle yet dignified courtesy, her unvarying kindness, the real nobility of mind which characterised her, were gradually producing their effect on him. That he could appreciate her was a hopeful sign. It was the best guarantee for his future, together with the fact that at Melbury there were few temptations. There are those, giant souls both among men and women, who will be good and great anywhere and under any circumstances. They are the elect of the human race, born teachers and prophets, no matter what their sex or sphere; to them God is always revealing Himself, and on them rest enormous responsibilities and obligations in the way of patience and long-suffering towards the weaker vessels; but among these weaker vessels, 'the dim common multitudes,' whether of rich or poor, goodness does depend much on condition and surroundings; and that five thousand a year does undoubtedly assist in producing and maintaining it.

John Erle in a home the very atmosphere of which was refinement and dignity and goodness, with as much hunting and shooting as he could reasonably want, and with work which he liked, was less likely to fall than John Erle on a very small income, amid the temptations of a great city, tied down to labour which his soul loathed.

It remained a fact in John's favour that he could appreciate Lady Emily and her surroundings of goodness and dignity, and be influenced by her and them. He was not to live permanently at Melbury ; but as no suitable abode had yet been found for him, he continued to stay on there at the request of his hostess, and had not left at the time of her illness.

He sent constant telegrams to Smedston ; hours of horrible anxiety followed, but the end did not come, and Laura and her mother never ceased to hope.

One day came a less desponding report ; a more cheering one followed ; and at last she was pronounced out of danger. The praye

of the congregation at Smedston Church had been requested for one who was dangerously ill. When that report, 'out of danger,' came, deep and heartfelt were the praises and thanksgivings which were offered up in public by 'some persons desirous of returning thanks to Almighty God for His late mercies vouchsafed to them.'

The Sunday post did not arrive at Smedston till late. When Laura got home after the morning service on that day on which thanks had been returned publicly for Lady Emily's recovery, she saw, among the letters laid out on the hall table, one for herself. It bore the Melbury post-mark, and the direction was in Harold Carew's handwriting. She took it up to her room to read, and found that it contained an earnest entreaty to her to go to Melbury and stay with Lady Emily during her convalescence.

'Your presence would do her more good than anything else now, and she has asked for you repeatedly, quite spontaneously, for I have never spoken of you or alluded to you

in any way. She is so anxious to see you, and I am so anxious that you should be with her, that, rather than she should be deprived of your presence, I would promise to go away if my being here makes you unwilling to come.'

There was a great deal more in the letter —apologies for asking her, 'presuming on their friendship,' and so on. If she could come, John would go for her to Smedston, or would meet her at —— Junction, as she preferred.

Laura having read the letter through several times, took it down-stairs and put it into her mother's hands. Mrs. Erle also read it through more than once, then, looking at her daughter, said, 'You know what going means, dear?' The two had no secrets from each other.

'It may mean that, mamma, or it may not ; things change so ; but I think I ought to go to Lady Emily, no matter what it means.'

'No, my child ; don't go unless you are fully prepared for the consequences. You could not ask Mr. Carew to leave his mother now.'

‘I don’t want him to leave her, mamma.’

So Laura wrote to Harold accepting his invitation, but making no allusion whatever to his offer of going away. In her heart Miss Erle thought the offer a most foolish one, and one which was made in the full assurance that it would not be accepted. ‘It would serve him right if I had told him he must go,’ she said to herself; but she did not tell him so; and when, John having met her at — Junction, she arrived at Melbury, Harold was standing on the steps awaiting her. He anticipated the servant in opening the carriage door.

‘I can never thank you enough for your kindness,’ he said, as he helped her out.

Lady Emily was delighted to see her.

‘I am getting well as fast as possible, my dear; I began to get better the moment I heard you were coming;’ and she clasped Laura’s hand in her delicate fingers.

The nurse still reigned supreme in the sick-room; but after dinner Miss Erle went up to sit with her hostess for a little while. As she

was leaving, having said 'good-night,' she met Harold at the door of the anteroom.

'Let me carry your candle for you,' he said rather nervously, as she thought. 'Are you going to the drawing-room, or where?'

'I was going to the morning-room.'

She had the same apartments assigned to her as on her former visit.

'But you are going down again?' Then, without waiting for her reply, 'Which is it to be—am I to go away or may I stay? You did not tell me in your letter.'

They had reached the morning-room, and were standing at the door, he holding the candle so that the wax was making little excursions all over her dress, and the light was falling full on her face.

'How could you think I would ask you to leave your mother at such a time as this?' she answered in a low voice, and looking at him for a moment as she spoke. He hesitated, then said gravely, 'You will come down to the drawing-room? John is there, and

you will find some amusing books. I will just say good-night to my mother, and then join you.'

Lady Emily's illness afforded a convenient topic for conversation, and John was always ready to talk for himself and other people too. He had a thousand questions to ask about Smedston and its belongings; about the nature of the sport that had been enjoyed there, and especially about a dog which Claude had promised him.

'By the bye, where is Claude now? I haven't heard of him for ages,' continued John, who was apt to be discursive.

'In London, I believe; or at Glynton. I have not seen him lately.'

Laura spent most of her time with Lady Emily.

'It is so delightful to have you, my dear. Good Scott has been devoted in her attention, but it is not like having you, is it? Ah, my dear, when I was ill I thought so much of you, and wanted to see you. You were a little vexed with me once, I'm afraid; weren't you?

But that is all over now, and you must never be vexed with me again.'

'I was not vexed, dear Lady Emily.'

'I thought you were, dear—just a little cold, you know. You did not like my taking good Mr. Saffery's part.'

'How is Mr. Saffery?' asked Laura, smiling.

'Very well indeed, and always so full of inquiries about you; but I see now, of course, that it would never have done.'

'I wonder you could ever have thought it would do, Lady Emily,' Laura answered gravely.

'Ah, now, my dear, don't speak in that way. When you do, I think you are vexed with me. We all make mistakes sometimes, you know.'

Laura kissed Lady Emily with some endearing expression, and just at that moment Mr. Carew came into the room. He saw the action, and smiled a little.

'Mother,' he said, 'don't you think it would do Miss Erle good if I took her for a

drive in my dog-cart this afternoon while you are having your sleep ?

‘Now that *is* curious, dear Harold! As I was lying here by myself a short time ago, before dear Laura came in, I was just thinking, “I will get Harold to take her for a drive. He likes driving, and she won’t be afraid, as I should be;” for I must tell you, Laura, I never can make up my mind to get into his dog-cart. It is so very high, and the horses seem so fresh; and though he is as good as can be, and doesn’t laugh at me or scold me for being afraid—’

‘Except when you scream, mother,’ he interrupted, smiling. ‘I can’t stand that.’

Before a third person Mr. Carew would speak quite freely to his young lady guest; but if by chance they found themselves alone together, each was so oppressed by the presence of the other that neither could utter a word. It was a fortnight of precarious happiness to both.

‘Do you like driving over the Downs?’

he asked, as he got up into the dog-cart beside her.

Yes; Miss Erle liked it beyond everything; and to-day it was particularly enjoyable up there, for the air was soft yet fresh, with a spring-like feeling, though it was late autumn, almost winter.

When they got home Harold said, ‘Come into my den for a minute, Miss Erle; you haven’t seen it since you have been here this time, and I want to know what you think of the alterations I have made.’

They went in, and he made a feint of consulting her about some changes he had effected. Suddenly he interrupted himself.

‘I had a letter from a friend, or perhaps I should say an acquaintance, this morning, in which he mentions that you are engaged to Claude Dashwood. Am I wrong in thinking that if you had been you would have announced the engagement—to my mother, at least?’

‘I am not engaged to him. I don’t know who can have said I was.’

‘Will you think me impertinent if I ask you what—I mean—if there is any foundation for such a report just now?’

‘None whatever.’

He took up a book, laid it down again, and went on nervously :

‘The day you came here you told me you did not wish me to go away, but it is no use my staying unless you will promise to stay too ; it is only making the trial harder in the end. Can you not promise?’ in a wistful pleading tone. She coloured, looking down.

‘If you really wish it—if it makes you happy,’ she said, after a little pause, ‘only, I can’t think why you are so anxious to burden yourself with—with any one so troublesome as you will find me,’ with a look divided between tears and smiles, like an April sky.

He took her hand eagerly, an expression of joyful content in his eyes. ‘Why? Because I can’t settle to anything. I’m for ever thinking of you, and hearing your voice; your face comes between me and everything I try to do; but now—now that I know you care

for me, that I shall be able to have you always with me—'

'You hope to be able to think less about me?'

'I hope to feel less restless, and to be able to settle to something, like a reasonable human being.'

'Then, in fact, you take me as a kind of composing draught?'

'Composing! Good heavens! Anything but that!' passing his hand over his forehead; 'you haven't had a composing effect on me, I know. Exciting, provocative—anything but composing!'

'Well, I never thought I should live to be taken as a composing draught; it is humiliating, and the fear of injuring your health is all that induces me to submit. We shall quarrel horribly, you know.'

He laughed a little. 'There is nothing I like better than quarrelling with you; I mean, it amuses me when you quarrel with me, and I—I wouldn't quarrel with you really for all the world.'

‘Don’t be too sure of that. I shall provoke you terribly, I feel sure. I sha’n’t be a meek and patient wife.’

‘I never for a moment did you the injustice to suppose you would. I have always been of opinion that patience and meekness are needed in the husband, not the wife.’

‘Then why are you so foolish? No, Mr. Carew, I did not say you might do that,’ trying to free herself from his arm.

‘Oh, but I thought—surely—it is the regulation thing—’

‘If you only do it because it is the regulation thing, you can’t really care about it; so you certainly may not.’

‘There I beg leave to differ from you, Miss Erle.’

‘And I suppose now you will want me to conciliate Lady Emily?’ resumed Laura, when she and her lover had settled their difference.

‘Conciliate her? Surely you must see that no conciliation is needed.’

‘I do see it; and I am very sorry for it.’

‘Why?’ looking a little hurt.

She glanced at him for a moment, a sudden tenderness softening her dark eyes.

‘Because—because I should like to show you that now I should be willing to make a sacrifice of my pride for your sake. Do you remember what you once said?’

If Lady Emily Carew found any difficulty in reconciling herself to her daughter-in-law she concealed it wonderfully; and if smiles, tears, and apparently heartfelt benedictions were signs of delight, she certainly was delighted.

Hearing she was awake, they went into her room together after that conversation in Harold’s den; she was able to be up, and was lying on the sofa, a beautiful picture of womanhood, though no longer of the blooming type that stood blushing by Harold’s side.

‘Well, my dears,’ she exclaimed, ‘did you have a pleasant drive? I have been expecting you for a long time.’

‘I have brought you something, mother,’ Harold said, while Laura knelt by her side, partly to kiss her, but chiefly to hide her confusion.

‘My darling children!’ cried Lady Emily; and then they all went through a series of promiscuous embraces. When they had in some degree subsided Lady Emily said, laying her hand on Laura’s, ‘Ah, my dear, when I was lying face to face with Death a month ago I had but one regret, and that was that you were not my darling Harold’s wife. Had you been so I should have died happily, knowing I was going to meet my dearest husband, his father;’ and with a look of the tenderest affection her eyes rested on her son’s face; ‘but it grieved me to leave him alone, and to think that perhaps my mistaken love had separated him from you, for I see now that he would never have been happy with any one else.’

‘You will try to like me for his sake?’ Laura murmured, tears in her eyes.

‘No, my dear; I love you so dearly for your own sake that I cannot love you more for his. I was once a silly old woman; but as I said to you before, all that is over now.’

That was the only allusion ever made to Lady Emily's opposition to the marriage.

Mrs. Elliott was jubilant when the news of the engagement reached her. She gave Laura a magnificent wedding-present, as if to mark her sense of the tact and discrimination she had displayed, and was particularly gentle and forbearing to Claude for some time to come, as if compassionating his disappointment. That disappointment was severe enough; for in spite of Laura's refusal, he had not ceased to hope till she went down to Melbury.

Yet, in spite of his disappointment, he ever retained the deepest regard and esteem for her; her influence over him continued to be powerful, and his friendship for her called forth one of the best parts of his nature. But he went through life a soured and disappointed man, embittered by the conviction that the world was neither good enough nor wise enough to appreciate his merits, miserable because the ordering of all mundane

affairs—and supramundane too—had not been committed to him. Had such been the case, he would undoubtedly have made many little alterations in the nature of people and things in general. Two years after Laura's marriage he fell a victim to Miss Bingley's conscientious dislike of being 'a failure.' It was inevitable that he should fall a victim to any woman who determined to make him her husband. She had only to 'play up' to certain salient points in his character, and he was hers. Violet captured him first, Miss Bingley second; and a very good captor she was, though he did not appreciate her excellencies any more than he had appreciated Violet's. She was cold, which was her misfortune, not her fault, and statuesque and large, while his ideal woman was a slight creature, all life and fire; but then he could see that she was not Laura Erle before he married her, so he had no reason to complain. Complain he did, however, to himself, and feel again, as he had felt before, that he had been 'caught.' And yet his wife's unfailing kind-

ness to his eldest daughter should have earned his esteem and gratitude. Even when her own little ones came gathering round her she never let Violet's child feel her mother's loss, so far as she could supply it, though Claude's openly displayed preference for her must often have been a trial.

One bright spot there was in his life—one thing on which he could look without bitterness or disappointment. All the best love of his heart was given to Violet's daughter. The young lady united his own cleverness to her mother's brightness, sweetness of disposition, originality, and hatred of 'shams,' the result being a combination of truthfulness, determination of purpose, and strength of character, which in any other girl he would have pronounced detestable; but the independence which had lisped out its baby prayers at his knee and pressed baby kisses on his face could not be otherwise than right and beautiful in his eyes, and no shadow ever came to mar the perfect love that subsisted between the two.

John Erle justified Harold's belief in the reformatory effects of a country life; he worked steadily under Mr. Price — so steadily that the mercenary young lady, having ascertained that the promise, 'with all my worldly goods I thee endow,' would not in his case mean 'with abject poverty I thee endow,' consented to bear her part in the marriage service.

A house was found for them near Melbury; and if John, with Laura on one side and his wife on the other, had not gone straight, he would have been a man naturally far more set on evil than he was.

Harold Carew's glossy black hair became early streaked with gray, and his brothers-in-law, Messrs. John and Teddy and Frank Erle, who were much at Melbury, were wont to say that this symptom of premature old age was entirely owing to the life his wife led him. It may have been so, and it was certainly remarkable that Mr. Carew never contradicted them, but would sit listening to their accusations of their sister with a happy smile on his face, which showed that he had

learned, at least, to bear misfortune with equanimity.

In the early days of their married life he had been much given to teasing his wife, and once, when he had been more than usually aggravating, she had protested that if he went on she should soon begin to regret that she had ever come to Melbury, rising at the same time to leave the room. He detained her by putting his arm round her, and asked, half in jest, half in earnest, if she had ever yet regretted it.

‘Regretted it? Oh, Harold, how can I say all you have been and are to me!’ she exclaimed in low tones of passionate feeling, and then added, as if to herself, ‘light to the sun and music to the wind,’ resting her head against his shoulder to hide the emotion in her face.

Lady Emily never had reason to complain again that Melbury was dull, or that she was lonely, for if Harold and Laura were away, there was always Amy or some other sister to bear her company. The old house

echoed with gay young voices, laughing, talking, calling on Lady Emily for help, sympathy, advice, till at last even her boundless capacity for loving and being loved was almost satisfied.

THE END.

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